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CIRCE'S DAUGHTER

“La vie est un instrument qui on commence toujours par jouer faux.”

CIRCE'S DAUGHTER

BY
PRISCILLA CRAVEN *pseud.*

Author of
"A Lighted Candle," "The School of Love," etc.

T. Shore



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PART I

CIRCE'S DAUGHTER

CHAPTER I

THE GAME

RICHARDS looked carefully over the table with the eye of the well-trained manservant. He retouched a bowl of lilac that offended against his slavish idea of symmetry and then put a screen across the dying fire.

It was the end of May and the night was warm, but as Carey Image was to be one of the guests that evening, Richards had seen to it that the room was well heated. For Carey Image had just come back from five years' sojourn on the frontier of India, and Richards was afraid that the rigours of the Eastern climate—particularly trying to a man in the fifties—might strike a chill into his sunbaked body. He was thinking about him as he placed the screen, for Richards had been in the Currey family for many years, and he remembered well the genial little man, generous with his *pourboires* and "full of pleasant remarks"—the expression was Richards' own, communicated to his wife, the cook—who had been godfather to the owner of the rooms thirty-two years ago, and had, on the occasion of the christening, optimistically prophesied that the baby would grow into a remarkable man.

Richards had heard the remark, and he now recalled it

as he drew the curtains. Was not Carey Image's prophecy coming true? He had been the first in the field, if one may use that expression of a prophet, but others now began to endorse his opinion.

"Wonderful how he knew," muttered Richards to himself, "for babies is that alike, all pink and squally."

Then by a natural sequence of thought Richards glanced at a large photograph of his master in wig and gown which reposed on a table, and which had been taken at the request of his mother, who lamented afterwards that it made him look too severe and old. A remarkable man? No, the title was not yet earned; for no man is remarkable until he is forty and has buried the prophet, his godfather. Still, Gilbert Currey was well on the way to success, and that very week had seen him take a big stride forward. Had not his success in the Driver case made the eyes of the legal profession and a good many of the public turn towards him? Richards was old-fashioned enough to take a pride in the fortunes of his master.

A slight noise through the curtains which shut off the dining-room from the room in the front portion of the flat caused the butler to turn. One of the guests had arrived early. He must apologize for his master's non-appearance. Gilbert Currey was still dressing; he generally rushed home from his chambers at the last moment.

"Ah!" said a well-remembered voice, "it is the faithful Richards. How do you do, Richards, and how have the years treated you?"

Carey Image smiled genially, and Richards, as to an old family friend, permitted himself an answering smile.

"I hope I see you well, sir."

"Tolerably, Richards. My bones creak a little.... Ouf! Was it always the custom to make the rooms so hot?"

Richards, crestfallen, explained. "I will open the window wider."

"Yes, do. But it was thoughtful of you, Richards, very thoughtful. It seems that everyone looks on me now as a salamander.... So you are here with my godson in his flat. How is that?"

"Well, sir, when Mr. Gilbert came to live in town, my mistress was anxious that I should look after him, so my wife and I came up here."

"Ah! let me see. Your wife made delicious omelettes. I remember them well. So you came here to give him, as it were, all the comforts of home. Lucky young dog. I am confident of a good dinner now, for I was a little doubtful, Richards, as I dressed. Gilbert is not an epicure, or at least he was not five years ago. He eats—well, he eats, and that's all there is to it. I have come to the age when I dine. And I remember your wife's cooking. Will you tell her so?"

The compliment pleased Richards and afterwards the cook, as it was meant to. Image had been born with the knack of saying the graceful thing in the right place, and his memory was wonderful. This trick had made many friends for him.

"I will tell my master you are here."

"No, no, don't hurry him. A party of five, eh? To celebrate his birthday and his latest success at the Bar? He is going to be a remarkable man."

"I was just remembering what you said, sir, when you came in."

Image smiled, and taking off his glasses, carefully polished them. "Ah! he was so sturdy and he shut his little mouth so firmly—a great deal in the set of the mouth even at the early age, Richards—and he knew what he wanted so decidedly that I felt there was a career before him. He commenced to orate loudly in church, and I understand the same oration—more intelligible and persuasive—won this much talked-of Driver case. Don't hurry him on my account. I have not yet become accustomed to the taxi-cabs. Distances by rickshaws and

distances by four-wheelers I know, but taxi-cabs—I find myself hurrying along like the witch on her broomstick.”

Richards quietly withdrew, and Image surveyed the rooms through his glasses, which made his near-sighted brown eyes so extraordinarily brilliant and piercing. He nodded in old acquaintanceship to several pieces of furniture and a few pictures, for Gilbert's mother had robbed Wynnstay Manor for her son's furnishing. On either side of the fireplace were two new portraits which had been painted since Image had been away. One represented a woman, with delicate colouring and well-chiselled features. The calm blue eyes were shallow as pools of water in the sun, and there were no full curves to the lips or any indication of deep emotion or temperament. A well-preserved woman—Gilbert's mother. On the other side was a companion picture, Sir John Currey, Bart., M.P. No weakness there, rather a dominating nature, an iron will, a certain ruthlessness in the lines of the heavy jaw, a certain coldness in the direct glancing eyes.

“A capital portrait, my old friend,” apostrophized Image. “I wonder if Gilbert will——”

“Now, Carey, talking to the devil?” broke in a voice on his meditations, a full, very masculine voice, that filled the room. It made Image's voice seem effeminate and thin. “My old nurse used to say when she found me muttering to myself that I was telling the devil too much of my mind.”

“My dear fellow, how glad I am to see you again. It's a silly habit of mine. I and myself, we often talk to one another.... Let's have a good look at you.... A bit heavier——”

“Yes,” said Gilbert laughing ruefully, “I am putting on flesh. Don't get enough exercise. You haven't changed, Carey.”

“Ah! I have definitely come to the shrivelled stage I was looking at your father's portrait. Capital! When you laugh you are not so like, but your face in repose—

very like. I am glad to hear of your success, my boy. Johnson Marks was in court yesterday, and he told me your speech was truly remarkable for a young man, and you know how many young barristers he has heard. You must have been very pleased at the successful issue of the trial."

"Yes, I confess I was. I wanted to pull the thing off. I made up my mind to get him acquitted."

As he said it, the determined set of his mouth was old beyond his years and reminded Image very powerfully of his father. Then Gilbert smiled and clapped Image on the back, and the impression of egoistic ruthlessness was dissipated. When Gilbert Currey smiled he had considerable charm. Women would have let him know this if he had found time to court them.

Richards' voice was heard at the door. "Mr. Iverson."

"Hallo, old chap, flushed with victory, eh? Lord! what a lot of swotting you must have done over that case. Your knowledge of Eastern poisons knocked me silly. You're a nut, you are."

No one could have mistaken Jack Iverson for anything else but a Service man. As a matter of fact, he was in the Blues, and exceptionally good-looking, with that rare distinction in a man—a wonderful clear, healthy skin. His eyes a curious jadelike green with the bluish clear whites that one usually sees only in the eyes of a small child, Jack Iverson was one of the handsomest and richest young men that lounged about Mayfair.

Image did not know Jack Iverson, but he knew the next guest, an old friend, Dr. Fritz Neeburg, and he had heard of the last arrival, Gilbert's particular friend and college chum, Colin Paton.

The impression Paton made on the casual observer was that of a well-groomed reserved man of a very English type, and one of the best. There was nothing at all arresting in his appearance; he had regular features, smooth hair, well-cared-for hands, and a general air of wellbeing.

He was three years older than Gilbert, though they had been at Oxford together, but he had been delicate in his early manhood, and had spent several years in desultory travel. Paton's movements were all quietly deliberate; they might have belonged to a man of fifty equally well as to a man of thirty. He did not give the impression of forceful energy, as did his friend. Quite unlike in character and tastes, they were yet excellent friends, and though Gilbert would have been at a loss to describe or analyse Paton—he had no interest in psychology, apart from its bearing on his legal work—Paton had long ago realized the possibilities and the limitations of his host.

They sat down to dinner in a pleasant intimate circle of yellow light. Richards' wife had a passion for flowers—she would spend hours standing in front of the beautiful florists' displays in the West End, when she took her constitutionals—so Gilbert's rooms and table were always tastefully decorated. This evening, heavy-headed, fragrant jonquils, rather sick and drooping with their own sweetness, nodded from some exquisite Venetian glass, while bunched violets in silver bowls added to the spring-like effect. Image was quick to notice the flowers.

"The English flowers! You must have spent ten years in the tropics to appreciate them. One gets so satiated with gorgeousness and overpowering perfume, just as one gets tired of the burning sun and the eternal blue sky. But the English flowers one never tires of. There is such a wonderful simplicity and purity about them. They refresh and cleanse one. In the East there are flowers that are positively wicked, one almost starts back from their viciousness. But the English flowers are perfect."

"I saw your lights burning at two o'clock this morning," observed Neeburg; "were you celebrating your victory, Gilbert?"

"No. I was working."

"Don't overwork, old man. Don't urge the willing steed too fast and furious. I think we are all inclined to do that nowadays. Faster and faster physical and mental locomotion seems the order of the day."

"And that's how you rake in the guineas, Neeburg. You shouldn't grumble. But I'm as strong as a horse. Work doesn't hurt me. Thank God, I inherited a good constitution from my father."

"My dear fellow, the strongest horse, if you overwork him, will sometimes go lame. You've been working very hard the last couple of years. Keep things in their proper proportions—that's the secret of life and happiness—proportion!"

"Ah!" said Image briskly, "that's very true, Fritz, only we usually learn that secret when it's too late and everything is out of proportion."

"Proportion!" said the host quickly. "How can you keep a sense of proportion nowadays? Look at me. When you start in the legal profession the proportion is on the wrong side. You have nothing to do except to wear out the leather chairs at your chambers. Get a move on and a few eyes directed to you, and you are very soon swamped with work. And if a man doesn't work for all he is worth with a singleness of aim and ambition between twenty-five and forty, he will never arrive. You have to keep your nose to the grindstone or success will pass you by. It's all very well for doctors to talk of moderation and a sense of proportion, but how can you be moderate? Life is immoderate nowadays."

"You mean that a man's ambitions and wants are immoderate," returned Neeburg.

Jack Iverson, who was quite frankly out of the conversation, tried to contribute his quota. "I say, what's the good of spending all the days of your youth swotting?" he said in his rather rich, lazy voice. "The game isn't worth the candle."

Gilbert went on a trifle impatiently. The thing to

do nowadays is to specialize. Make up your mind what you can do best, and what you want, and hang on like a bulldog till you get it."

"A bit of a gamble if you only stake on worldly success," said Paton quietly.

Image nodded emphatically, and looked curiously from one young man to the other.

"It isn't such a gamble. I believe most firmly that you can ensure success provided that you have certain abilities and a fair constitution. You hear a lot of people blaming Fate for their non-success in life. How many of them have really striven whole-heartedly to get what they want? The road to success is a sort of obstacle race, and you can't afford, while you are surmounting the obstacles, to either look to the right or the left or even behind you, to see who is possibly going to overtake you. Success isn't a chance; it's a certainty if you concentrate." Gilbert had a very decisive manner, which was worth its weight in gold to him in the courts.

For a moment there was silence as he ceased speaking.

"Yes, but my dear boy," said Image at length, "what is success?"

"Making money, I suppose," said Jack Iverson, watching Richards refill his glass. He was glad that he did not do any of these strenuous things. He had a secret awe and lazy admiration of Gilbert.

"No," said his host, "you generally make money if you are successful—it follows as the night the day—but I should say that very few of the world's successful men have worked for the sake of money."

"Well, how do you define it? Notoriety, fame, the applause of indiscriminating men who shout with the crowd, paragraphs in the halfpenny papers side-by-side with an account of the latest high kick of a popular actress, a long obituary notice to be followed by a badly-written book of biography by one of the family which nobody reads—is that worth struggling for?" Paton put the

question quietly, his voice a trifle colourless after Gilbert's.

"*You* are not ambitious," retorted Gilbert. "You never were. You have always let other fellows walk over you, chaps with half your brains. You dream your time away."

"No, excuse me, I don't dream. I hate excessively to hear myself classed with those vague, anæmic brains that wander like will-o'-the-wisps over the world. You think I wasted my time at Oxford because I did not take any degree. I don't. I taught myself how to think. I refused to cram my brains with facts most of which would be of little use to me in after-life, or to my neighbour. I tried to leave a little room for the imagination. Oxford appealed to my imagination, and I think I have brought something away from her that will be a precious possession all my life. You came away with an enormous capacity for assimilating knowledge, with a well-trained memory and a habit of pigeonholing everything and everybody. Most useful to you in your profession, my dear fellow, but it did not appeal to me as worth working for."

"You have no ambition to be labelled 'successful'?" said Image, who had been watching Paton as he spoke with his brilliant dark eyes. He found something that he liked in Paton, something which he vaguely missed in Gilbert and had always missed in his father before him.

"I don't care for what is usually called success. Of course, many people say that because they know they won't set the world on fire; and in spite of what Gilbert says, there are people who will never, with any amount of concentration, arrive; but, honestly, I don't much care what my fellow-creatures think of me from the point of view of worldly success—I care very much otherwise; and I refuse to try and narrow myself down within the cramped little borders of success. I want room to develop, and I don't want to be forced through the world's mill and come out in a certain pattern."

"And Gilbert doesn't care a pin what people think of

him 'otherwise,' but very much from the world's standpoint, that's the difference between you," said Neeburg, helping himself to a quail *en cocotte*. "Now, I wonder which makes for happiness?"

"Oh, hold on!" cried Gilbert, laughing. "I like people all right. I protest, Neeburg."

Neeburg smiled and shook his head. "Individuals are not really necessary to you," persisted Neeburg.

"I won't be made out a hard and miserable materialist just because I am honest enough to say I am ambitious."

"My dear boy, there are many like you," said Neeburg; "and ambition is by no means a bad thing. But with you the game is the thing. You are the type of man who lives and dies in harness. Men and women are pawns in the game of life to you. Once I thought as you do, but I was checked in time. And I found it wasn't worth while. Bay-leaves may be bitter."

"Well," said Image; "to every man his own meat and his own poison. I've met a good many famous men in my time, and I can't recall that any of them seemed to be particularly happy. To be great is to be lonely. ... How delicious these strawberries are!.... I think I'd rather be one of the common herd. The big man looks over the heads of others in a crowd, but he misses a lot of friendly glances and intimate whispers. I even like some of the jolly, familiar nudges one gets. No one would dare to nudge a great man."

The others laughed, and Richards came in with the coffee.

"That reminds me of something that was said to me yesterday," said Neeburg, "by an Anglo-Indian just come home. Was no end of a pot in India with absolute control over a big province. He was lamenting that it was horrible to find himself obliged to use buses and sit next to—just anybody!"

"He doesn't appreciate the nudges," laughed Gilbert.

"He's forgotten how jolly they are," retorted Image, with a twinkle. "That's just what I complain of."

Jack Iverson, who had been vainly trying to follow "those brainy fellows," broke in with a commonplace. "Well, I hate the people you see in buses and tubes. They think they are as good as you, and they always seem in such a beastly hurry to get somewhere. And, all the time, I suppose most of 'em don't do anything in particular."

"No, they only earn their livings," said Neeburg drily.

"Well, I'm glad I don't have to," said Iverson, lighting his cigar. "I'd rather have money than brains. I say, I've got to rush off soon, Gilbert. Claudia insisted that I must go to Lady Laud's dance at the 'Ritz.' Rotten fag, bunny-hugging and Gaby-gliding."

"Is your sister going too?" asked Gilbert quickly.

"Claudia? Yes. I suppose you got an invitation?"

"Yes, but I had forgotten all about it."

"Dancing is a beastly bore. I'm fed up with it," continued Iverson complacently, his striking good looks in obvious contrast to his commonplace mind. "I'd rather play bridge any day, wouldn't you?"

"Well, I don't dislike dancing, only I can't afford the time. If I go to a dance I always stay too late. And I certainly should if I danced with your sister."

"Not half a bad dancer, is she? She goes on at me for being too lackadaisical. She says she likes a partner who *feels* the music. But how can you feel the *Chocolate Soldier* every night, and what are you to feel? Quite imposs. I can't understand all these delicate sort of feelings. They were playing 'The Rosary' the other night at supper, and the girl with me put on such a die-away air that I thought she felt sick. She was awfully annoyed with me for offering her some brandy."

There was a general laugh as the men moved away from the table. The noise of the traffic outside was like a huge buzzing bee; the fresh air, holding a subtle promise of

spring, came in through the open casement windows.

Iverson was the first to break up the party. "Claudia will go for me if I don't get there in decent time."

Fritz Neeburg went with him. He never kept late hours, for the hand of the surgeon must be steady and there must be no overnight fogs in his brain. Presently Carey Image Paton and their host, were alone together.

CHAPTER II

CIRCE'S DAUGHTER

WELL, I've been an unsuccessful man as the world counts success," said Image, as though the thread of their early conversation had never been broken, "but I've had fifteen years of great personal happiness. Can one expect more than that in life? Could I have been more successful? And I've laid up a store of beautiful memories for my old age."

Everyone knew the story of Carey Image. He had himself started out in life at the Bar. When in his thirty-second year and well on the road to be a K.C., he was briefed as counsel in a divorce case. The woman was unsuccessful in divorcing her husband, the definition of legal cruelty did not cover practices and habits that had reduced a beautiful, healthy woman to a frightened shadow; but she was successful in winning a heart that had stood between her and the world for fifteen years afterwards. Pariahs in social London—for in those days public opinion was more cruel than it is to-day—they had wandered all over the world together. They had not been quite idle, for she helped Image to write several books of thoughtful travel that had first set the fashion of "wander literature." She had died five years previously, and never once had Image regretted what he had given up for her. He had rescued a woman from the lowest depths and made her perfectly happy. His worldly

failure in life had been his real success. The look in the dying woman's eyes as they had turned to him had made an imperishable crown.

Gilbert was silent. As a child he had known Image, and he had often wondered since if it had really been worth while to make a pariah of himself. He was answered now. It was so different from his mother's version of the good-looking woman who got Image in her clutches and whom he was too unworldly to see through.

"I think that fifteen years of happiness is more than most of us can hope for," said Paton quietly.

"I remember as a boy," said Image reminiscently, being asked what I wanted to do in life, and I replied 'To do one thing well and make one person happy.' I think I did the latter, but in the first I have failed. My globe-trotting books are pretty well known, but what are they, after all?" He looked at the portrait of Gilbert in his wig and gown, and there was a sort of gentle regret in his eyes.

"Surely you have been successful in both," said Paton. "To love well—isn't that one of the rarest talents?"

Image turned on him with his charming smile. "Ah! but it was so easy. If you had known her you would realize it was nothing to my credit—nothing at all." He said it very simply, as though stating an undeniable fact. For a moment there was silence, while the ghost of a beautiful, sweet-natured woman passed through the room.

Then Gilbert, who, like most Englishmen, felt rather uncomfortable at the sentimental vein into which they had fallen, poured himself out a whisky and soda, and the prosaic hiss of the syphon dispelled the ghost.

"Well, I must be going," said Paton, rousing himself from a little reverie and slowly getting out of the big armchair; "time for all good children, et cetera. Good-

night, Mr. Image, I am very pleased to have met you. I hope we shall meet again."

"We are sure to," said Image cordially. "I wish you would come and lunch with me at my club one day? You will? Good. I'll drop you a line. Good-night to you."

Gilbert went to see him out, and Image, rising, looked again at the photograph of him which his mother said was too severe. As Gilbert came back to the room he compared the original with the photograph. More than a presentable man, Gilbert Currey was distinctly good-looking. The brow was broad and high, and the hair grew thick and strongly. His eyes, which Image remembered in the baby had been blue like his mother's, were now a darkish grey and the lids fell rather heavily over them. This, however, did not give any impression of sleepiness, rather that of self-sufficiency and reserve force. The nostrils of his well-shaped nose were somewhat wide, denoting his energy and driving power. The chin was rather too heavy, and had he not closed his mouth so firmly the lips would have been a trifle sensual. Above the medium height, he gave promise of being one day a heavy man if he did not exercise sufficiently, but now he was still well-proportioned. The two men were physically a great contrast, for Carey Image was always known as "little Carey Image," though the diminutive indicated affection as well as size. He had the small build and fineness of the Japanese.

"Well, cousin Carey," laughed Gilbert as he met the ruminative gaze of the brown eyes, "sizing me up, eh? Find me much changed?" He took out a pipe and commenced to fill it.

"No, very little, surprisingly little. You're going to be like your father. How is he?"

"Well, and fiercely combating socialism and all the other revolutionary 'isms.' You can imagine how much

he likes the democratic tendency of the times. He gets grimmer over them every time we meet."

Image smiled. "Yes, politically I find a great change in England since I left it. But it's interesting—very. . . . Your friend Paton is very charming. What does he do?"

"That's a difficult question to answer. I can't reply 'nothing,' because he is always doing something. Much more energetic than he looks. His father is urging him to go into Parliament, and I think he will later on. But at present he says he is 'informing himself,' whatever that may mean. He is helping Sir John Tollins with his Prison Reform Crusade at the moment, and he is visiting various institutions all over the country."

"Ah! yes, a sociologist. Such men do very useful work. And what is Mr. Jack Iverson?"

"A rich young ass," laughed Gilbert.

"Sir," said Carey with a twinkle; "that is not information. I can see into shop windows as well as you."

"Well, he's in the Blues; but I always think of him as Claudia's brother." He said it without the slightest embarrassment, just as he might have referred to his own uncle.

"Claudia! A pretty name. Is she as pretty as her name?"

"Prettier. But they are a wonderfully handsome family. Looks on both sides."

Image lit another of his French cigarettes, and then he said gently, "And have you any designs on the pretty sister?"

"Yes," said Gilbert, with a curious thoughtful deliberation. "I think—I think I shall marry her."

A look flashed into his godfather's eyes at the—to him—curious way in which a young man expressed his intention of asking a woman to confer the greatest honour

upon him. But the modern young man was always astounding Carey Image and making him wonder if he had lost his bearings in India or if some mischievous god had deliberately turned things upside down.

"I was going to ask you if you had any plans other than worldly.... Is Miss Iverson likely to do you the honour to——?"

Gilbert broke in rather abruptly. The subtle reproof had passed him by, immersed as he was in his own thoughts. "You know the family? Mrs. Iverson was Sybil Dauntton-Pole, and Geoffrey Iverson is Lord Creagh's third son."

"Why, of course; I wondered why the name was familiar." A light broke in on him and he became animated. "I remember—why, yes. She was the woman who made such a sensation when she was first presented, and her portrait was painted as Circe and exhibited at the Academy? A lovely creature."

Gilbert nodded. "Time has taken his toll now."

Image was searching back many years. "Let me see, and wasn't she supposed to be a Circe in real life? Wasn't there a story about her and a member of Parliament——?"

"Oh! a hundred stories. One of the most talked-of women in London."

"A certain Royal personage was supposed——"

"Yes, it's always said so.... I should say she has had a high old time. Iverson never tried to control her. Of course, as I say, she's a bit *passée* now. She knows it, too, and has taken up with occultism, mysticism, or whatever you call it. 'I must occupy myself,' she said to me the other day. 'I have decided definitely to retire from the stage of Love while I am still desirable. My children bore me. I will seek the occult.'"

"Not an ideal mother for a girl," said Image.

"Oh! Claudia is all right. Here's her photo. She promised it to me if I won the Driver case. It only

came this morning." He took it out of a drawer and handed it to Image. In the corner was written in a firm individual hand, "Best congratulations, Claudia."

"Beautiful," said Image warmly, who was ever an admirer of all things lovely, especially women. "I think I have met her somewhere. Not at all like I remember the portrait of Circe."

"Not a scrap like her mother. A good deal of what the French call *beauté du diable* about Mrs. Iverson. Claudia's look are quite different."

Image began to recall various tit-bits of scandal and gossip that had found their way out to India regarding Claudia's mother. Utterly unmoral, passionately heartless, the fascinations of a siren, Image had heard many tales of her. He recalled vaguely one story, which was particularly scandalous and which questions the paternity of one of the daughters. There had been whisper at that time that she had gone too far, and weak, complaisant Geoff Iverson would be roused to divorce her.

"Miss Iverson is dark, I should say? Yes, I thought so." Image looked at the girl in the portrait, who looked back at him. She had adopted no coquettish pose, no drooping eyelids or heavenward gaze, but she looked straight out of the frame with her clear, fine eyes. And they seemed to Image to be asking innumerable questions of life. There was a suggestion, too, of eagerness about the mobile lips, as though they would open and presently shape the word "why?"

"Not a bit like her mother." Gilbert seemed to take a comfort in repeating it. "And although there is all this talk about heredity nowadays, such a woman as Circe is something unusual. Of course, if I thought——"

"My dear boy, can you be in love with her and stop to think it over in this way?" Image was a little impatient with his godson. He liked the girl with the questioning eyes.

Gilbert looked up in slow surprise. "Well, mother doesn't like Mrs. Iverson, as you may imagine. She calls her that 'dreadful, immoral woman.' And you know what mothers are. She's carefully picked out a girl for me. Plenty of money, and influential family relations. But the girl annoys me: she is one of the clinging, sentimental sort. I don't think I could stand her as my wife."

"Why—why are you marrying?" said Image slowly. Gilbert had evidently consulted his mother, or at least listened to her counsels. In some way Image was old-fashioned in his ideas of what is due to a parent, but he had never held it right that a mother should select a wife for her son.

"Why?" Gilbert knocked the ashes out of his pipe. "Well, I think it is about time."

"I see." Image looked again at the photograph. Gilbert was only marrying because "it was about time." What were the eager dark eyes asking for? Only for that? "You don't believe in having any sentiment about choosing one's life partner?"

"Oh, yes, of course. I've just told you the girl my mother has picked out would annoy me no end. I like Claudia very much. Only she is in a bad set, though it doesn't seem to have affected her. As a matter of fact, her mother has hardly had any intercourse with her. She has none of the domestic virtues, you know. As far as one can see there is no taint there, but—well, it's a serious responsibility to marry the daughter of a Circe. And people talk so much about heredity and eugenics——"

"My dear boy," said Image heatedly, "love snaps its fingers at heredity and pulls a long nose at eugenics. To the devil with them, I say. It's too much talk about these things that makes people so anæmic these days. If you love a woman, take her in your arms and keep her there. A good woman won't want to go far astray. But

keep her in your arms. Don't put them round her once and hold her tight till she says 'yes' and then loosen hold. Most Englishmen deserve to lose their wives." Image spoke with such warmth that Gilbert smiled.

"A champion of woman!" He took the photo from Image. For the first time a tinge of warmth crept into his voice. It may have been caught from Image. "She is handsome, isn't she?"

"No, I do not stand up as a champion of women. I would not dare to do such a thing. But, thank God, I was brought up to love and respect women and to think that they needed protection and guarding. And men are all the better for the responsibility."

"Women nowadays resent guarding and protecting. They've changed while you've been away."

"Nonsense, I don't believe it. They resent bullying and spying and the things that are done under the name of protection. They may *pretend* to like guarding and protecting themselves, but it's because their men-folk are such incompetent slacksters. You modern lovers, what you miss in life! Don't be a fool, Gilbert. You are in love with her, aren't you?"

"Oh! yes, I have a feeling that way." Gilbert gave a little laugh to cover his confession. For Image's enthusiasm was infective. And really Claudia was very charming. What a good hostess she would make. And she was quick to see things; her fine eyes had a wonderful way of lighting up—one of the gifts of the gods; she was interested in his career——

Image rose and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Why don't you put on your dancing-pumps and go off and dance with her to-night? I daresay she'll cut out some unfortunate fellow for you."

Gilbert considered. "I must go down to my chambers early to-morrow, and I wanted to read over a brief to-night. Still, I might go for an hour. After all——" He

broke off and put his pipe on the mantelpiece. After all, he had been celebrating a victory and his birthday. He had the feeling that he might allow himself a little treat. Claudia would be surprised and, he thought, pleased to see him. It was always easy to see her emotion mirrored in her eyes. . . . Yes, he would treat himself.

Image said good-night and went down in the lift. He was thinking of Gilbert, a little puzzled, a little regretful, of what he hardly knew—and he flashed back a glance to his own youth.

He stood still for a moment in the warm spring air and looked up at the stars. Then he took off his hat and for a moment stood bareheaded, as before a shrine.

"I'm very glad," he said softly; but why he was glad no one but himself knew, unless it were the stars.

CHAPTER III

THE WORLD, THE FLESH——

THE dance was at its height when Gilbert entered the ball-room. He thought of Jack Iverson's protest as the strains of the waltz from the *Count of Luxembourg* began to float over the room, played as only a Viennese orchestra can play it. Yet the strains were alluring to that part of him that was not the successful barrister, and his feet itched like any ordinary young man's to be dancing. Claudia, of course, would be booked up—she was, as her brother had left unsaid, a beautiful dancer—and no matter who went short of partners, Claudia did not. She had been out a year, and rumour said that she had had a good many offers of marriage. An aunt, who was anxious to see her settled, had said, with annoyance, that Claudia must be waiting for a prince.

Gilbert caught sight of Jack Iverson dancing with a pretty débutante who was too plainly desirous of winning his approval. The only son, he was in the curious position of being wealthier than his own father, for an aunt, who had in the sixties married an immensely rich Jew, had recently died and left all her fortune to him. Why, heaven knows, unless she thought that the money would be put into quick circulation. This made young Iverson a very desirable *parti* in the matrimonial market, and mothers of budding and blooming daughters were extremely polite to him. But Jack Iverson's taste did not lie in the drawing-rooms of Mayfair.

Gilbert waited about, but he could not see Claudia.

He turned away, more disappointed than he would have owned, and there, under a big palm, tapping her fan impatiently on her knee, he saw her—alone.

“Claudia,” he said, going quickly up to her, “are you not dancing this?” He called all the Iverson family by their Christian names. He had known them in his early youth, when their country house had adjoined his father’s. When Claudia was ten, their house had been sold—it was too far from town—and it was only during the last few months that he had really renewed his acquaintance with the family. Lady Currey had been unfeignedly glad when the Iversons moved away.

Claudia jumped up, all animation. “You here! I thought you couldn’t afford the time for such frivolities.”

“I can’t really, but I’ve come for an hour. I wondered if there was a chance of getting a dance with you.” The music was humming in his ears, there was a heady odour from a group of lilies beside them, and—and Claudia *was* glad to see him. “I should not have come otherwise,” he added. He smiled at her, and though he used the smile very seldom, it was quite attractive.

She met his eyes squarely without the least bit of a flutter, but a faint flush rose to her smooth cheeks. “Well, come,” she said, putting her hand within his arm. “I am engaged for this—but my partner has kept me waiting. So he can lose the dance. A laggard dancer, like a laggard lover, deserves to lose his partner.”

“Blessings on his laggardism.”

“If I had been an Early Victorian maiden, I should have waited patiently, like a brown paper parcel, till he came to claim me. . . . Ah, well! You dance much better than he does. He dances like a pair of animated fire tongs.”

Some people dance, and others move their feet. Claudia would have inspired an elephant to tread coquettishly. She had the real spirit of the dance in her, and a mag-

netism that communicated itself to her partners, no matter how stodgy and how deep one foot was in the grave. An old colonel had once said—he was turned sixty, and out of pure good nature she had danced with him—that it was too dangerous to dance with Claudia Iverson. "I can't afford to regret my youth so bitterly." Circe had had a good deal of magnetism in her youth, but it had been purely animal. With Claudia it was a tantalizing blend of spirit and body.

For some time they waltzed in silence. Then Gilbert said involuntarily, "I'm glad I came."

"I'm glad, too," said Claudia softly. A little strand of soft dark hair that had become unloosened swept his cheek now and again, her body gave to every movement, lithe, supple and warm. He forgot his career and the brief he had meant to study. His youth asserted itself—he had never really enjoyed it—and insolently told his maturer intellect to hold off and take a back place.

But Claudia, like most women, could think of many things while she was thoroughly enjoying the dance, for women can do several things at the same time. She was thinking of his triumph the day before. Many people had been talking about him the last few days, and prophesying big things for him. He was the young man of the hour, and he had left his work to come and dance with her. The thought was intoxicating.

Claudia was desperately tired of the men who did nothing. Her father did nothing—he sat on one or two boards, and grumbled at having to attend their monthly meetings—her brother did very little. Although he was in the army, his duties sat lightly upon him, and those duties seemed to involve little or no brain power. Jack confessed that the only time he thought was the few minutes when he was sitting in his bath in the morning. The man with whom she should have danced the waltz did nothing. He was vaguely going in for politics one day, in the

meantime he gracefully and idly existed. Most of the men Claudia knew, except one or two elderlies who were M.P.'s or the heads of large companies, did nothing in particular. And Claudia had a great admiration for the people who did things. As a girl, she had read all the biographies of famous men that she could lay her hands upon, and she had even once had a desire to do something big herself. Though she had long ago given up the idea, she still admired the vigorous men who did and thought strongly.

The dance came to an end and Gilbert led her out of the room.

"I was in court yesterday," said Claudia, tucking the little strand of hair tidily away under the fillet of pink coral and pearls which she wore. She was dressed in a pastel shade of something diaphanous and soft, that harmonized exactly with the creamy tones of her skin. The only colour about her was supplied by the corals which she also wore wound in strands round her neck and drooping over the front of her corsage.

"No, were you?" said Gilbert, thrilling at this evidence of her interest.

"I made Uncle John take me. . . . I had to bribe him by promising to go and play backgammon with him two afternoons this week. But it was worth it. I—well, I should have howled if you hadn't won the case, I was so excited. Uncle John went to sleep and snored, and he says I've pinched him black in my indignation. Isn't it dreadful to be old and not be interested in anything for more than half an hour? He said it was the air of the courts."

"I did make a long speech though. Did you realize I was speaking for two hours? You were not there all that time?"

"Yes, I was. Uncle John went to get something to eat, but I never budged."

"Claudia, how sweet of you." He came a little nearer to her and his nostrils dilated a little. No man is unmoved by the subtle flattery of a beautiful woman, and Claudia was looking her best that night.

"But," said Claudia, with an abrupt change of voice, "I wish the man, the prisoner, had been more worth it. An awful poor thing, wasn't he? Even if he didn't murder the boy, he was only a wisp of straw, wasn't he?"

"If men and women were all fine strong characters, my services wouldn't be required, would they?"

Claudia looked thoughtful, and the brown eyes seemed to grow larger and brighter, as though some lamp were burning behind them. "No, I suppose you live on people's weaknesses and lack of morals and stamina. Oh! dear, I don't like to think that."

"Well, don't think it. Don't let's talk about my work. Tell me what you have been doing since I saw you last week?"

She was leaning a little forward, her elbow on her knee, and he could see the rise and fall of her bosom, the soft curves outlined by the clinging chiffon. And though he sat outwardly unmoved, something tingled within him and strained like a dog in a leash.

Claudia sat up with a shrug of her shoulders. It was a little trick of hers that suited her dark eyes. "I have been gloriously doing nothing in particular, the same things as I did last year, meeting much the same people and talking much the same talk. I spent two afternoons helping at the Duchess's bazaar, and I smiled a continuous persuasive smile from ear to ear all the time, and I told a great many lies trying to sell things that were of an unutterable hideousness, and that nobody could want to buy. There was such a funny man came up to me. I tried to sell him a poker-work photo frame. 'Isn't it charming?' I murmured. 'Madam,' he said, with a little twisty smile that began in his eyes and came down to his

lips, 'if you will frankly tell me what you think of it, I will purchase it. Your tone lacks conviction.' 'Sir,' I replied, 'frankly I think it one of the ugliest things I have ever seen and nothing would induce me to have it in my room.' 'How much?' said he. And he bought it. I should like to meet him again. I am sure we should be friends."

"I wonder what he did with it?" laughed Gilbert. "Perhaps he put his worst enemy into it."

"If I ever see him again I shall ask him.... Have you heard about Pat? She has run away from Germany and come home. She says that speaking the Teutonic language all day was spoiling the shape of her mouth, and there was something in the air or the water that she was sure was making her figure spread! Isn't she too quaint? She announces that she has learnt quite enough for the present, and she insists that mother shall bring her out."

"Why, she's quite a child, surely!"

"Oh, no! Patsy is—let me see—nearly eighteen. Mother is so annoyed. You see I keep out of her way, but Pat is noisy about the house. She finds Pat absolutely antagonistic to—well to the spooks and the thought waves. She had hoped Pat would stay over in Germany for six months and acquire a philosophic language. Pat informed mother yesterday that she knew her type of good looks went off early, and she advised mother to get her safely off-hand before she began to fade." Claudia laughed heartily at the remembrance. "She's awfully pretty. You don't remember her?"

"I remember a small child with forget-me-not eyes and flaxen hair, who was always sitting down heavily on choice seedlings in the flower-beds and then crying because she had 'hurt' them."

"Yes, that was Patsy. But she'll get married quite easily. She's really sweet. She's got little tricks with

her eyes, quite natural, not affected—and her eyebrows go up in a funny way that makes her look like an intelligent cock robin. By the way, have robins got eyebrows? They seem eyebrows all over, don't they? Oh! Pat will make a hit when she comes out."

Gilbert looked at her curiously. Did Claudia not think about getting married? He hazarded a question in a bantering, rather intimate way.

"And when are you going off?"

"It sounds like a firework, doesn't it? I don't mind telling you in a burst of confidence that Aunt Lucretia thinks the squib is a little damp. It hasn't gone bang yet! But Pat will make a brilliant firework. Mind you don't get burnt."

The music had struck up again, and Claudia took up her programme with a faint sigh.

Gilbert put his hand over the little white-gloved one that held the card. "Who are you dancing with? Never mind who it is. Throw him over. Yes," he said firmly, as she protested, "I know it isn't your usual habit. But—well, isn't it a special night somehow? It's my birthday for one thing and——"

"Oh, is it? Many happy returns. You got my photograph this morning?"

"Yes, it's on my mantelpiece now.... Never mind the wretched programme."

"But what shall I say?" she protested laughingly, for, womanlike, she loved a high-handed man who insists on getting his own way.

"Say—say you prefer to dance with me.... Isn't it true, Claudia? Say it is."

One hand was quite lost in his. His compelling eyes were on her face. Something for an instant caught her by the throat and made her shut her eyes as she said almost under her breath, "Yes, it's true."

They made their way back to the ball-room. More

than one man stopped to congratulate Gilbert, and a good many women smiled up at him invitingly.

As far as Claudia knew, Gilbert never flirted. She had never heard his name coupled even lightly with that of any woman. And he was thirty-two! It was almost unique in her set, where sexual philandering is one of the most amusing games for passing the time. She did not realize that it was precisely for lack of time that he had not paid much attention to women. The Law had been his only love. Claudia was a little tired and contemptuous of the hurrying, bee-like gentleman who sips from many flowers with no distinct preference for any bloom. Many such had buzzed around her, but she had kept fast closed the petals of her heart. But Gilbert Currey was different; yes, he was certainly different.

A pale-faced, vapid youth, the heir to a famous dukedom, was just inside the door.

"Quick, that's my real partner. He'll grab me."

"He won't," said Gilbert firmly. He caught her to him a little fiercely, with all the primitive man in him awake. His mother's warning about the bad stock from which Claudia sprang was forgotten. He had decided that Claudia was his. *He*, and he only, was going to grab her and carry her off to his wigwam. *His* wife would never want to be a Circe. Geoffrey Iverson had never been worth much as a husband. Like most men, Gilbert had his fair share of conceit.

He guided her skilfully round the room, interposing himself and his arm between her and possible collisions, for the room was inconveniently crowded. She happily forgot the rest of the world and gave herself up to the sensuous music. But some of the gay spirit with which she had danced earlier in the evening had gone from her, a slight languor, more than a little pleasant, had stolen into her veins. The music seemed a lullaby to send her brain to sleep. She liked to feel the pressure of Gilbert's

arm and know that it enclosed her safely. She had danced with him before on one or two other occasions, but to-night his arm seemed to caress her. There was a curious charm in it and she abandoned herself to it. She had never before danced with anyone who had given her this sensation.

And Gilbert felt the blood rushing through his veins as he would have thought impossible an hour ago. The knowledge of her liking, her nearness to him, seemed to make a little hammer pound away in his head, so that he had to set his teeth not to let himself get giddy. And Gilbert, when roused, had a good deal of the masculine animal in him, only he was so seldom roused. When he was a youth at Oxford his very clear and reasonable brain had warned him of a possible danger to his working powers in the delights of the flesh, and he had made himself not think about them by grinding away at his books. His work and his intellect had become an almost invulnerable armour. But to-night passion took him by the throat and he could think of nothing but the lissome pretty body in his arms. And his intellect, not quite drugged, approved of this diversion. His mother had said it was time to marry. Why not combine pleasure and duty? His reason quite approved of this proceeding.

"Claudia," he said breathlessly, coming to a standstill, "it's confoundedly hot in here. Don't you feel it. Shall we—shall we try for some fresh air?"

She nodded, she did not want to speak. A beautiful dream had been roughly broken into. She had been happy in her unsubstantial dream; he—had not.

Gilbert was lucky enough to find an untenanted cosy corner in a convenient angle that cut them off from the rest of the world.

"Claudia, will you?" His arm was round the back of the couch ready to take her in his arms.

"Will I—what?" faltered the girl. She knew what he

would ask, but she had not imagined being proposed to thus. She had thought the man she could love would lead up gradually with protestations, with promises, with entreaties. Why did there seem no time for this? Why did something hurry her into his arms, something irresistibly compelling, stronger than herself?

“Will you marry me?” She tried to raise her eyes to his, and perhaps he caught a glimpse of what was in them for the next instant she felt his lips on hers, and the world rocked and then stood still.

* * * * *

Afterwards, she wished that it had been more as her imagination had planned. Though every pulse in her body still throbbed with his kisses, she yet vaguely regretted that Prince Charming had not come in the guise she had imagined. But that it was the real Prince Charming—in somewhat of a hurry and a little inarticulate—she did not doubt for a moment.

“But nothing is just as one imagines it will be,” said Claudia to herself and the pillow that night. And having discovered that truth, Nature kindly pulled down the blinds and she went to sleep.

CHAPTER IV

A TOY MOTHER

LATER the same day Claudia awakened to the sound of snortings and snufflings. Exasperated puffings sounded in her ear. For an instant she dreamed that she was being pursued down a long road by an angry motor-car bent on her destruction. It came nearer and nearer—now it was quite close—she put out her hand in vague dreamlike fashion to push it away. The motor-car retreated somewhere at her touch, but returned in a few seconds to make a fresh onslaught. Then something soft and velvety—obviously not a motor-car—rubbed up against her cheek. Claudia came back from the world of Nowhere in Particular to her own room in Grosvenor Square.

To whom could those snortings and snufflings belong save Billie, her beloved dachshund!

Claudia yawned lazily. Billie gave another tug to the brown plait on her pillow. That was always Billie's way of engaging her attention in the morning. Extraordinary, how long these superior mortals took to awake in the morning when they were always so bright and fond of pulling his ears at night!

The outline of the map of the world was still blurred for his mistress when she vaguely remembered that something very pleasant had happened to her. What

was it that made her open her eyes that sense of *bien être*?

"Oh!... Oh! Billie!" She turned on her elbow and kissed Billie's silky brown coat with unusual fervour. He was the most delightful thing in dachshunds, with a coat like sealskin, only softer and warmer, and the most pathetic and companionable eyes in the world. He was exclusively devoted to Claudia, who, in return, gave him a big corner of her heart. To the rest of the family he was a little elusive and aloof, rather bored with their desultory attentions, occasionally very busy with his own thoughts and affairs. Only Claudia's hand gave him real joy. Sometimes out of politeness he allowed Pat to think he liked her petting, but that was because she was only a young thing and Claudia was fond of her.

"Billie," she said, with a rippling laugh of sheer happiness, "you don't know it, but I'm different from what I was yesterday morning. I'm engaged!"

Billie regarded her seriously. He seemed to be digesting the news and wondering what difference it would make to him.

"Yes," continued his mistress, giving him a hug. "I'm engaged. I've promised to marry someone very, very nice. Congratulate me, Billie."

Billie rose to the situation and barked joyously.

"Thank you, sir. I am sure they were most sincere congratulations. Heigh ho! we shall have to tell mother. ... What do you say to breakfast, eh?"

She put her hand on the bell, and Billie blinked happily. He always waited to take his breakfast with Claudia, and really she was very late during the season.

"Billie, don't rootle about in the bed like that. Be more respectful, because I'm much more important to-day than I was yesterday." Then she lay back among the pillows and thought happily of Gilbert. She longed to see him or hear from him. She hoped he would telephone or

perhaps send her some flowers on his way to his chambers. She was certain he must be thinking of her just as she was thinking of him.

She had a curious and not unpleasant feeling that last night she had settled her whole life. She was like someone who had been standing at the cross-roads awaiting an indication which turning to take. Last night she had taken what she was sure was the right turning. Now the road of her life seemed to stretch before her like a glorious golden riband.

Yet, oddly enough, at the back of her mind was a sense of loss. She had lost the right of making her choice, she had lost a certain excited feeling that life was a great adventure. The adventure had taken definite shape now like a fluid that has been poured into a mould. Some of the delightful indecision, one of the biggest "perhapses" of life had gone. She had always taken it for granted that she would marry without making it her business to do so. She had looked with soft, speculative eyes at the men she met. Perhaps it will be this one—perhaps I shall sit next to him at dinner to-night—perhaps he will be one of my partners at the dance to-morrow! A girl who knows that she is attractive to men always has this feeling consciously or unconsciously. Now this feeling had merged into something else, the happy glow of knowledge. Love had come.

It seemed to Claudia that it had come rather suddenly, although she had known Gilbert for many years. It was only the last month he had seemed a "possible." She remembered the exact moment that the label had fixed itself upon him. She had been at a big dinner-party, given by the wife of the Home Secretary, and the man who took her in had talked all through the fish and the entrée about him. That was before the Driver case, when he had definitely proved his metal, but her dinner companion had been brought into contact with

him over some business and been greatly impressed with his ability. Claudia had heard vaguely of Gilbert's distinguished career at Oxford, but the thumb-nail sketch which her companion drew of him in his chambers arrested her attention. Then later that very evening she had met him at a reception which her aunt, Lady Pitsea, gave.

Claudia had an almost Greek appreciation and love for physical fitness, and had Gilbert not been a most personable man, her interest in his mental achievements might have evaporated. But because he was strong and came of healthy stock, the night-oil that he had burned had so far left no mark upon him. There was no doubt that he had personality, that he would never be overlooked wherever he went. Claudia could never have married a handsome man without brains, but it is doubtful if she could have loved anything lacking in physical fitness. She demanded a certain amount of beauty and colour in her life, just as she demanded a certain amount of fresh air and food.

Until the reception they had not met for a couple of years, and he showed unmistakably that he admired her. After that he seemed to dwarf the other men with whom she ate and danced and talked. That she did not meet him often at social gatherings—he was too busy to go—whetted her appetite for his company. Sometimes he would come in to some gathering with a little line of fatigue between his brows. It had been an agreeable pastime to smooth it out by her conversation and gaiety.

She realized this morning, as she stirred her coffee, that actually they had talked very little. Not that he was a silent companion, but they had always talked in crowded places of other people and current events. Necessarily their talk had been largely on the surface—a large surface, but yet only the surface of the things that matter. She had never, since childhood's days, been

with him for many consecutive hours. She had never, since those days, been alone with him in the country, tramping side by side, or sitting for long, lazy hours under the green trees. Claudia knew that such times bare the man or woman of mannerisms and conventionalities, and expose the real ego. Two or three times before she had thought she liked men, but always on further and closer knowledge she had found them disappointing. Then she had been annoyed with herself for even that faint stirring of interest. In some unaccountable way she had felt humiliated when her brain failed to approve of them. But Gilbert could not disappoint her. How could such an admittedly clever man disappoint any woman? She was glad he was going to have a career, she saw herself helping him, entering into his thoughts and aims, working and loving side by side. She was glad she had not fallen in love with a nonentity or an idle, rich man.

She reflected that she would have hated to feel apologetic for her husband. And yet she had seen girls of her own age, whom she knew to be clever and even brilliant, marry men, and not for money or position, who seemed to be absolutely devoid of the grey matter we call brain. She had heard them rave rapturously over commonplace males that bored her in twenty minutes, and she knew that Love is a freakish thing. Fate might have played a joke on her. "I wonder what it is exactly—this sex attraction?" she murmured to the sleeping dachshund, and pigeonholed the question for future investigation, when her mind was quite clear and at rest, for Gilbert had urged a speedy marriage.

Gilbert's love-making had been almost inarticulate. She wished he had said something memorable, something she could enshrine in her heart and when she was an old woman bring forth with a happy smile—"Do you remember you said——" But Gilbert had hardly even

said the conventional *Ich liebe dich*. Ah! but his heart, beating violently against her own, had said it. Claudia did not know that in the crucial moment love and passion are indistinguishable, so she had no doubt that his soul had spoken to hers.

Billie raised his head from the eiderdown and looked questioningly at the door. Someone was approaching. A rap with something sharp and hard followed.

"Can I come in, Claudia? Johnson said you were having your breakfast."

Claudia called out permission to enter, and a fair young Amazon, riding-crop in hand, stalked into the room. It was Patricia Iverson, generally called Pat, the youngest of the three children of Circe. Pat was unusually tall, and in her long riding-habit she looked even taller than usual. She was flushed with exertion, her fine, fair skin showed almost startlingly against the black of her hat and habit.

"Bill, where are your manners? Why don't you wag your tail? All right, I shall wag it for you! What's the good of being a dog with a usable tail, if you don't wave it when a lady enters the room? Oh! it was spiffing in the Park this morning."

"I am sure it was. I feel ashamed to be in bed, but I was so late again this morning. Past four. Aren't we fools to dance the night away and spend the mornings in bed?"

"Yes," said Patricia, disposing her long limbs in an easy chair. "But I shall do it when I get the chance."

"You ache to be dissipated?"

"Rather, because after dissipation you can appreciate virtue and—a rest. Claudia, why are you smiling like a Cheshire cat this morning? I hate people to smile like that unless they tell me the reason. It's like hearing the music of a dance you can't go to."

Claudia wondered if she would break the news to Pat.

It was strange, but there was nobody to whom she felt *compelled* to impart her news. There was no one would quite understand and be glad with her in her gladness. Pat was so young, and then you never knew how she would take things. Sometimes she was as hard as nails, and Claudia naturally felt she would like a sympathetic ear.

"I've been riding with Mr. Paton," continued Patricia, pulling Billie's ear, a proceeding which he bore with the patience of an early Christian martyr. "We had such a jolly gallop. He's awfully nice, isn't he?"

"Very nice," agreed Claudia heartily. She felt that the whole world of men and women were nice this morning, but she could honestly give Paton an emphatic adjective. "He's a great friend of—of Gilbert Currey's"

"He says such quaint things sometimes, and he isn't a bit like most men you meet. Do you know what we were talking about this morning? We were discussing animals, and how far they feel human emotion, and how much brain they've got. He'd been reading some German book on the subject. He's fond of animals. Oh! he sent you a message."

"Yes?" Claudia was wondering what the bond of sympathy was between the two men.

"He told me to tell you that he's ordered that book you wanted from the publisher. And I am to convey an invitation for us both to have tea with him to-day in Kensington Gardens. We don't need Jujubes."

Jujubes was a disrespectful name applied to Miss Morrow who had once been with them as governess, and had slid into position of amiable General Utility. She could be used as a chaperon, walking-stick, or sedative. Hence Pat's nickname for her.

"I promised to go to some theatricals at Stretton House," said Claudia, grabbing her diary, "and, let me see—yes, I ought to go with Aunt Carrie to call on some people."

But her words were regretful. She would have loved to sit in the Park and have tea under the trees, where the birds come hopping round your chairs for crumbs, and everything around is green and fragrant. It would have accorded so much better with her mood than paying formal calls on people to whom she couldn't tell the great and important thing that had happened to her.

"Don't be a pig, Claudia. I'm not allowed to do much, and you might say yes. Mr. Paton won't want me without you."

"Oh, yes, he would. Take Jujubes."

"Pooh! he looks upon me as a flapper. Wait till mother gives me some proper dresses and I begin to fill out. I look like the Bones of the Holy Innocents now, but you wait till I get some curves. They are beginning to come."

She nodded her head knowingly, as she looked down at herself.

Claudia suddenly decided she would throw over Aunt Carrie. This was a special day in her life, and she felt she ought to do just what she wanted most. If only Gilbert could tea with them! She thought of telephoning, and then some instinct warned her that Gilbert would think it trivial. Gilbert not being available, Claudia found the idea of a quiet sunny afternoon with Colin Paton quite pleasing. One never had to be politely talkative and interested in him. One talked or one didn't talk, just as one pleased. Sometimes one found oneself talking particularly well, helped by the right word or the appreciative smile. Claudia thought of him in a sort of revolving roundabout with Gilbert, as she took her bath, and tried to find the right word to express him. The best she could get was "companionable," although she felt that was a little tepid.

When she was dressed she sent a message to her mother. She must tell her the news. Sometimes Claudia

did not see her for days together, and they were in no sense mother and daughter, but Claudia felt it was the proper thing to inform her at once. It had always seemed to her friends that Mrs. Iverson was a mother merely for the three weeks she had to remain an invalid. After that she shook off her maternity.

The maid came back with the answer that Mrs. Iverson was having her face massaged, but that Claudia could come to her.

Her mother's bedroom and dressing-room suggested a hothouse with a quantity of mirrors. Circe had always been something of an exotic, and lately she had grown more so, or what Pat called "stuffer." There was an insidious Eastern perfume that always trailed after Sybil Iverson, and the room Claudia entered was heavy with it. The hangings and huge divan were Oriental in colouring and material. The sun was excluded from the room by pink curtains closely shrouding the windows, and electric lamps with becoming shades were burning. Her mother was in the dressing-room, prostrate under the hands of the masseur, who had a great reputation among women, especially those who were on the borderland of youth and middle age. He was ridiculously expensive, but his hands were magical.

Mrs Iverson lazily opened her closed eyelids and regarded Claudia. Her eyes were still very beautiful. "You wanted to see me dear?"

Claudia hesitated. "Yes, but——" If it had been Pat she would have said cryptically "P and P"—private and particular.

"Well, Jules has nearly finished." Mrs. Iverson was still beautiful, but with a great effort. In her youth when the famous portrait had been painted, she had been almost as fair as Patricia, but now her hair was tinted auburn and her complexion was enamelled to match. Her eyes—still marvellous—were of a deep shade of

blue, like a violet under the rays of the midday sun. Her mouth was much fuller than Patricia's; and told its own tale. Mrs. Iverson had always been unutterably bored with her children, but she seemed to like or rather dislike Claudia the least. Patricia annoyed her, because she was reminded of her own lost freshness, and Jack she found stupid. She really rather liked to talk to Claudia for a quarter of an hour or so. Claudia was neither *gauche* nor ignorant. And her brown eyes, with their purposeful gaze—well, some memories are pleasanter than others, even to a Circe.

Claudia picked up the *Occult Review*, and tried to be interested in it till her mother should be free.

At length Jules departed. Mrs. Iverson inspected the result in the hand-mirror.

"He's a marvel. I hope he'll still be alive when you want him.... I like the cut of your skirt, Claudia. Who made it? Ah! I thought so. She can cut skirts. Don't you find her ruinous?"

It was a polite interrogation, as though to a stranger.

"Yes, I thought her more of a robber than usual," continued her mother. "I'm glad you haven't got such long legs as Patricia. When she comes toward me with her arm waving she reminds me of a sign-post on a country road. It's a pity. Men don't like too long women. You and I are just the right height. I think this modern girl by the yard is a mistake. None of the famous women such as Jeanne du Barry and Ninon de Lenclos were very tall. Patricia will make most men look ridiculous."

"Perhaps Pat doesn't want to be a Ninon de Lenclos," suggested Claudia, with a twinkle.

"Nonsense, every woman wants to be a Ninon de Lenclos, if she could have the chance. Don't be taken in by this talk of 'I wouldn't.' It's a case of 'I couldn't.' Most women have to be virtuous, because they can't be

anything else, and they make the best of it. What's that American saying, 'Virtue must be its own reward—any other would be a tip.' Do you know what Ninon said herself, 'Love is a passion, not a virtue: and a passion does not turn into a virtue because it happens to last—it merely becomes a longer passion.'.... But what did you want to see me about?"

It should have been a propitious opening, this discussion of love, but somehow it was not.

"I think—I think I ought to tell you something."

"Don't unless you want to," said her mother quickly. "I don't think you *ought* to tell me anything. If you think it will interest me—tell me, but don't use me as a mother, please."

"Would it interest you to know that I am engaged?" It was out. Claudia breathed more freely. Then she blushed as her mother looked at her with unusual attention.

"Yes, that quite interests me. I have wondered once or twice what sort of a man you would choose. Who is it?"

"Gilbert Currey, mother."

"Gilbert C—— yes, the M.P.'s son. Does something, doesn't he? A barrister? I remember his mother Marian Darby. She never liked me, and I returned the compliment; but we were once great friends. What made you choose her son?"

"Mother! I—I fell in love with him. Why do people marry?"

Circe smiled at her young daughter, who met her eyes quite squarely but was obviously uncomfortable.

"For hundreds of reasons, my dear. You'll find out some of them later on. Of course, one must marry"—she retouched an eyebrow with a little brush—"just as one must have a birth certificate and a license for the motor.... I don't think I've noticed him since he was a boy. I remember him at Wynnstay. I used to see

him in a canoe on the river, deep in his books. Is he still strenuous and booky?"

"People say he is going to have a big career." It was difficult to talk to her mother.

"Really? And you want to be part of that career? Well, I daresay it is all right. Better tell your father. I should think you might have done better from a worldly point of view, though the Curreys are rich, and Gilbert will succeed to the baronetcy.... You've really made up your mind? Your aunt was telling me the other day that you are considered one of the most attractive girls in Society to-day. She mentioned a Russian prince of great renown—I forget his name——"

"He is fifty and has been married twice already."

"Men grow more appreciative, not less so, as they get older. And Russians are sometimes fascinating. I remember one—Russians can be very wild and romantic."

"I don't want a wild and romantic husband." Claudia laughed outright.

"No?—perhaps you are right. There is plenty of time, and I daresay a Russian would not make a comfortable husband. Well, child, I am glad if you are glad. I must meet my future son-in-law." She made a little grimace. "It adds at least five years to my age, but I suppose I can't ask you to consider me. I think he had better come to dinner one night. Look in my engagement book and find a night. Thursday—yes, that will do. Write down your name and Gilbert's, and then I shall remember all about it. One or two of the family might be asked." She gave her daughter a smile of dismissal. It was very sweet, if a trifle automatic, and it showed to advantage her perfect and natural teeth. Mrs. Iverson never kissed her children, but then she thought kissing between women ridiculous. The only thing she ever kissed of the female sex was a little toy terrier.

When Claudia went downstairs, relieved that the news had been broken, she found the book had arrived that Colin Paton had promised to obtain for her. She cut the string and dipped into it. It was a volume of essays that he had mentioned to her and that she had expressed a desire to read. Colin Paton never forgot things.

She looked from the book to the telephone and wished that Gilbert had found time to ring her up and just say, "Hallo! Here am I and there are you!" It would have seemed to make last night more real, more sure. Like a puff of wind it crossed her mind that the sender of the book would have somehow got in touch with the woman he had asked to be his wife the night before. Pat liked him. Perhaps he would marry Pat, she thought idly.

She was too keenly, too tinglingly alive for delicate essays that morning. Later on she would enjoy them. She put them down and picked up an illustrated paper.

The first thing that met her gaze was a portrait of Gilbert and a paragraph recording his right to such a distinction.

There was no one in the library, and she raised it impulsively to her lips. It was not a satisfactory kiss, for the paper smelt of something nasty and oily. Still the portrait seemed to bring Gilbert into the room with her. And this man was hers, this man at whom all the Bar was looking, was hers, hers, hers!

Because she was only twenty-one, thoroughly healthy and full of life, she danced round the room holding the paper to her breast. Her eyes were alight with happiness her soft lips were curved with the joy of love and life.

Then having danced her little Te Deum to the music of her heart, she waltzed out of the door with a cheery shout for Billie. She would take him for a walk and give him joy, too.

CHAPTER V

GREEN BAY-LEAVES

LADY CURREY was not at all pleased with her son's engagement, and she said so. She came to town for this purpose, and made Gilbert give her lunch while she strongly disapproved, from the *hors d'œuvres* to the coffee. She had the soulless good looks which Time, as if contemptuous, neglects to touch. And because she could afford to do so, she purposely dressed in a middle-aged, sober fashion which she considered dignified. She had a great sense of her own importance, and the modern grandmother of fifty in ninon and picture-hats was to her extreme anathema. She and Circe were much the same age. Sybil Dauntton-Pole had flashed into society like a brilliant comet, a trail of admirers behind her, when Gilbert's mother, the amiable daughter of the then Home Secretary, had been one of the small and unremarked stars that dot the social firmament.

Lady Currey had brought her husband a considerable sum of money, but the only thing for which she needed money was to gratify her craze for old china. If she had any heart or soul it was given to her specimens of priceless Ming and old Chelsea. She spent hours every day dusting her cabinets. Her only idea of travel was the opportunity it gave her for visiting museums and picking up bargains in rare porcelain.

For Gilbert she had a pleasant feeling of proprietor-

ship—much the same as she felt for the wonderful *famille rose-jar* of the Kien-Lung period which she had herself unearthed in a visit to the East. Gilbert was an only child, and he had been little or no trouble. This was the first time he had disappointed her. When other mothers complained of their sons, of escapades at Eton and Oxford, or premature and undesirable love affairs, of monumental debts and lack of family pride, Lady Currey's lips always took on an added shade of complacency as she thought of Gilbert and the even and admirable tenour of his way. It was entirely becoming that Gilbert should be so satisfactory and in some way reflected well on herself, just as did the discovery of the *famille rose-jar*. Lady Currey liked everything around her to be *comme il faut*, not the elastic *comme il faut* of fashion, but rather the correctness of the copybook and the ten commandments. Curiously enough, engrossed in herself and her china, she had never until quite recently speculated, as do most mothers, on her son's probable choice of a wife. When she had thought of it, she had dismissed the idea with the assurance that Gilbert would choose wisely and soberly and to his advantage. It was not in her to feel any jealousy of the woman Gilbert should love.

"I am grieved," she said, sitting very upright—she rarely used the back of a chair—"I am grieved to think that you intend to marry into the Iverson family. The Iverson are not a family of which I—or any right-thinking people—approve."

"But, mother," said Gilbert, rather taken aback, for he had become used to her invariable approval, "I am not marrying the family. I am marrying Claudia."

"Ah! that's what you think—the usual reply. For Geoffrey Iverson I have no particular dislike—he has been the cat's-paw of a clever and unscrupulous woman. His family is a very good one. She would have spoilt

any man who had the misfortune to be married to her. Why, Sybil Iverson is notorious!"

"Claudia is quite unlike her in every way. Why, she is not even like her in appearance."

Lady Currey lifted her thin, fair eyebrows. It was unbecoming that she should tell him the scandalous rumours that floated about respecting Claudia's parentage: Such things could only be told by a father to a son. She vehemently disapproved of any plain speaking between the sexes. Such a crime could never be laid to her charge; not even in the marital chamber had she ever discussed any such thing.

"She is the daughter of her mother, Gilbert, and the mother—I say it deliberately—is a bad woman, a woman who has trailed the glory and purity of the flower of womanhood in the dust." Lady Currey occasionally indulged in such flights of rhetoric. She had rehearsed this in the train.

"I don't think the two women see much of one another." Gilbert was a little nettled. "Claudia told me herself that she hardly knew her mother at all in her young days. She was left entirely to her governesses. She can hardly have imbibed any—any idea from her mother."

The pathos of such an admission did not strike Lady Currey, it only helped to justify her present attitude.

"It is, of course, very painful for me to have to mention such matters to you, but why has she seen so little of her mother? Because Sybil was—I blush to say it—so surrounded by lovers that she neglected her maternal duties. I say again, she is notorious for her lax life and morals. Don't you believe in heredity, Gilbert? Think of the blood that runs in that girl's veins."

Gilbert frowned. "Heredity is a curious thing. Not worth worrying over, I think. I don't profess to understand it."

"I have studied the question." She had read one book that was quite out of date. "I firmly believe in heredity. The vices or the virtues of the father and mother are surely transmitted to the children." It was pleasing to think that only virtues could be transmitted to Gilbert, but it was all the more annoying that those inherited virtues should be linked with the vices of Sybil Iverson's child.

Gilbert was becoming annoyed, and made no reply. After all, his mother was only a woman, and women never could argue. It jarred on his manhood that she should take him to task, and his voice was a little cold as he inquired what she would take to drink.

"You know I always take *one* glass of claret." The tone somehow implied that a woman like Sybil Iverson might reprehensibly vary her drink with lunch, but she had regular habits. Then she returned to the attack.

"Claudia is not the woman that we—your dear father and I—would have chosen for you."

"Doesn't every mother say that about her son's choice?"

His mother sighed and waited while Gilbert ordered the wine. "What sort of bringing-up has she had? What sort of a wife and mother will such a girl make? Her mother's only god was pleasure, her only commandment 'Enjoy the fleeting hour.' Do you mean to tell me that the daughter of such a woman has proper ideas about life? Would you care to be the complaisant husband of a Circe?"

But here Gilbert put his foot down. His mother must be made to see that he knew quite well what he was about, that he had not run haphazard into this engagement. Not on any account would he let her see that curious mixture of surprise and annoyance at the back of his mind when he thought of the proposal scene. He had an undefined feeling that he had been hurried

into it, though how he had been hurried, by whom or by what, he did not seek to explain even to himself. To Gilbert's cast of mind vague feelings were best ignored as symptoms of a weak and illogical brain, much the same as vague symptoms may denote an illness of the body. Still the feeling was there, behind many stacks of docketed and pigeonholed pieces of information. Yet he had almost made up his mind to propose to Claudia—oh! yes—only—that particular night?

"Mother, I cannot hear you say such ridiculous things about Claudia. You do not know her. You might as well say that the children of murderers will all grow up murderers."

"You might commit murder in a sudden fit of passion, but such a warped, degraded nature as Sybil Iverson's is another story. Besides—the sons of a murderer have probably seen him hanged or punished—the law steps in; but who punishes a woman like Sybil Iverson? Society, nowadays, is too lax to such creatures, and virtuous women have to mix with them and take them by the hand, or else be dubbed ridiculous or old-fashioned. Well," with a sudden little gust of passion like a disturbance in a tea-cup, "thank God, I am old-fashioned and absurd. I can say my prayers every night and lie down in peace.... No, Gilbert, you know I only take *one* glass of claret."

"They say Mrs. Iverson has given up her wicked, siren-like ways and gone in for spiritualism." He wished his mother realized that she was keeping him from his work and would hurry up with her lunch. The leisurely ways of the country were not those of town. But Lady Currey was doing her duty.

"Such women never give up their wicked ways, they take them to the grave with them." Both Gilbert and his mother had very little sense of humour, with the distinction that Gilbert knew when things were ridiculous. "I know Sybil's mother died of a broken heart." This

was quite untrue, she had died of fatty degeneration of the liver. "But there, the Psalms say that the wicked flourish like green bay-trees, and if they did in King David's time there is no doubt they do now. But their punishment awaits them, Gilbert; always remember that."

Gilbert nodded absently. Life after death was one of the vague things, like psychology, that he did not consider as practical politics. But he did not tell his mother this. If she liked to imagine him striving for a golden harp with humility of soul, she might.

"I confess I am disappointed in you, Gilbert. I had looked forward to your choosing some nice girl I could take to my heart, someone like Maud Curtice, for example."

Maud Curtice was a colourless girl who agreed with Lady Currey in being shocked at the modern scanty fashion of dressing—she was painfully thin and had ungainly hands and feet—and who devoted herself to the mothers of eligible sons. She also had a large income.

"Wait till you know Claudia, mother. You are sure to like her."

"I have heard she is very handsome and a great favourite in Society," returned his mother gloomily. "It is a bad report to my way of thinking. That's how her mother started."

Just then, to his great relief, Gilbert caught sight of Colin Paton wending his way out of the restaurant. He hailed him with joy, and Paton came to a standstill beside their table.

Lady Currey approved of Colin Paton. His manners were respectful and he showed an intelligent interest in china. She never noticed the quizzical gravity with which he received her views on life, nor the humorous twinkle in his eyes at her criticisms. She thought him "a very nice young man."

"Colin, old man, come and have some coffee with us."

"Just had some. I hope you are quite well, Lady Currey?"

Gilbert made a business of looking at his watch and starting with alarm. "By jove, I didn't know it was so late. I must just swallow my coffee and run. May I leave the mater with you to finish her coffee at her leisure?"

Colin caught the appeal in Gilbert's eyes and guessed the cause.

"Certainly, if Lady Currey will accept me as a poor substitute for you."

Lady Currey smiled a gracious assent. "I hope your dear mother is better, Mr. Paton?"

"Yes, thank you.... Busy as usual, Gilbert? I hear the proverbial busy bee is quite out of it."

"Well, I am tearingly busy. Don't get a minute to myself."

Paton slipped into his chair. "And yet you've found time to get engaged, I hear? I wrote my congratulation this morning."

"Thanks, old chap. Oh! getting engaged doesn't take very long." Gilbert laughed pleasantly and displayed his firm white teeth.

"Doesn't it?" returned Paton, smiling. "I think it would take *me* no end of a time. But there, we shall soon be born in the morning, married at midday, and buried in the evening!" He saw Lady Currey looking at him rather doubtfully. "A man like your son, Lady Currey, takes a woman and the world by storm. *Veni, vidi, vici* is not for me. Women have to know me quite a long time before they remember me."

"I am sure you have a great many friends," she said encouragingly.

"Yes, that's why I expect I shall never get a wife.... Really must go, Gilbert? I had tea with Claudia and

the long-legged Patricia yesterday. We wished you could have been with us."

"Teas are not in my line. I suppose I shall see you again soon?"

"Well, I'm going away, you know."

Gilbert turned back in surprise.

"What, at the beginning of the season!" exclaimed Lady Currey.

"Going out to the Argentine for a while. A friend of mine is going out on a political mission and wants an assistant. I've decided to accompany him. Never been there, and it must be an interesting country."

Gilbert raised his eyebrows. Why on earth didn't Paton stop in one place and make a name for himself? He had often advised him to do so.

"Sudden isn't it? I thought you said the other night that you were remaining in town until the end of July."

Paton nodded. "I've changed my mind. I think I want a change. I shall only be away six months or so, perhaps a year."

Gilbert's thoughts had raced ahead. "Then if we're married at the end of July, as is probable, you'll be away? That's too bad. I had relied on you for being best man."

"You'll be married so soon? No, I am afraid I can't assist to give you away."

Gilbert again expressed his regrets, which were quite genuine, and left his mother with Paton. Colin did not make the mistake of rushing in where angels fear to tread, but waited for Lady Currey's comments.

"What do you think of this engagement, Mr. Paton? I know I can speak to you quite frankly. I think it is a great mistake. Weren't you surprised?"

"Yes," returned Paton truthfully, "I was very surprised. Gilbert did not confide his hopes in me. I didn't see any wooing going on, and he never talked about her

to me. He must have made the running quickly." Then he added, half to himself, "He can't have seen a great deal of her."

"Of course not, or he wouldn't have done it. Gilbert, for once in his life, has lost his head over a pretty woman. Why, you are much more of a friend than Gilbert."

A slight shadow crossed her companion's face and he dropped his eyelids. "Well, I thought I was. But then friend—oh! it's the *veni, vidi, vici* trick. She's a charming girl, Lady Currey, with all sorts of possibilities."

Lady Currey pursed up her thin lips that had never bestowed or received a kiss of passion. "She is handsome, certainly. But is she the wife for Gilbert? I have lived long enough to know that looks are a poor foundation for matrimony."

"She has quite a good deal of character," said her companion quietly, without any annoying enthusiasm. "I am sure she will develop into a splendid woman with the man she loves. She isn't the usual pretty society doll, you know."

"Does it strike you that Gilbert wants a woman of character?" asked his mother with unexpected acuteness. "Clever men are usually better mated to stupid wives. Look at Carlyle and Jane Welsh! Much too clever for one another." Then irrelevantly, "There are too many clever girls nowadays. I don't believe they make any the better wives and mothers for being so clever. I am sure I never wanted such a daughter-in-law."

Paton found himself at a loss for conversation. He knew he could do Claudia no good by praising her warmly to her future mother-in-law, he might even make matters worse. Yet to hear Claudia belittled made something leap within him into fierce flame. It seemed disloyal to listen to Lady Currey's sneers. Yet he knew that Claudia must storm the citadel of Lady Currey's

heart herself. As an advance agent his labours would be wasted. But Paton, looking across the table into the light, offended eyes of the woman, was sorry for the girl. It was rather odd. His mother, a confirmed invalid, and Lady Currey had been close friends in their youth. Yet his mother had warmly liked Claudia when she had once met her for a few minutes. He was startled to find that his current of thought had communicated itself to Lady Currey.

"Your mother always did like pretty things—I know she admires Claudia—but she was always unduly swayed by good looks, even at school. I know how deceptive they are. A man told me the other day that his wife had left him and been through the Divorce Court, and he attributed it entirely to her good looks. 'A very pretty woman is difficult to live with,' he said; 'she gets a great deal of adulation and flattery in Society, and naturally the husband at home falls rather flat.' There is a lot of truth in that, Mr. Paton."

"Perhaps he was the typical English husband who, as soon as he has won a wife, forgets to be her lover," replied Paton. "You are very careful and precious of your rare china, Lady Currey."

His *vis-à-vis* stared. She wondered that Paton, who was usually so smooth in conversation, should make such a sudden jump. But it served to divert her mind from Claudia.

"I had such luck last week. I was walking along the High Street in Moulton and I caught sight of a pair of vases. I thought that powder blue could be nothing less than Chinese. They had blue and white reserves on them. *You* know what that means. I got them for a mere song, and they're beauties. Since I last saw you I have bought...."

Still talking china, Paton saw her into a taxi.

He strolled away from the restaurant. It was warm

and sunny, and the pedestrians seemed all in a good humour. Paton often wandered for hours through the streets of London, finding in that wonderful panorama food for eyes and brain and heart. He loved the feeling that he was part of the crowd, and his mind was stored with many observations and memories. The romance of the streets was no idle journalistic phrase to him. He felt it around him on all sides, plucking at him with alluring fingers leading him into the land of dreams. Often at night he would give himself wholly up to its enchantment, wandering along mile after mile through quaint byways and on misty commons, through silent Suburbia and the noisy, restless East-end slums. London was to him a book of unending pages with countless illustrations.

This afternoon he mingled with the crowd, but he did not heed it, so that he did not see a woman in a motor energetically waving her hand to him and directing the chauffeur to stop.

"Mr. Paton—oh! Mr. Paton, what a day-dream!"

It was Claudia herself, looking altogether charming in light summer attire. There were waving, greeny-blue ostrich feathers in her Leghorn hat and around her neck. The softness of the feathers and the peculiar shade of blue accentuated the creamy tint of her skin and the brightness of her eyes. Her happiness shone through the envelope of the flesh like a flame through clear glass. A heavy-eyed woman of the lower classes who was passing marked her and muttered, "She has a good time, I'll be bound," then, wrapped in her own bad one, passed on.

Paton went up to the car and held out his hand.

"Mr. Paton, you're just the man I want. Do come and see some pictures with me. Jujubes hates pictures, don't you, Jujubes?" She turned to the faded, amiable woman beside her in the car.

"I don't hate them, but they all look so alike," said

Jujubes mildly. "When you've seen one, it seems to me you've seen the lot."

"There, listen to this awful heathen who rejoices in her darkness! Leave me not to her tender mercies. Jujubes can do some shopping for me." She looked entreatingly at him with her fresh young mouth smiling at herself, Jujubes, Paton and the whole world.

He hesitated for the fraction of a second. Then he said cheerily: "Of course I'll come, if only out of kindness to Miss Jujubes. And I shan't be seeing any more English pictures for a long time, I suppose." Then he told her of his intended visit to the Argentine.

"Oh!" said Claudia blankly. "Oh! I wish you weren't going away. I shall miss you so much—we shall all miss you." She said it quite naturally as the thought came to her mind. One could always do that with Colin Paton.

"Thank you," he said smilingly, as he helped Jujubes to alight. "It's very good of you to say so." He seated himself beside Claudia.

"Don't. You needn't be formal and polite. Why are you going? Is it the *wanderlust* again? Or is it to help you in your career?"

Gilbert had taught her to think of careers.

"Oh! I shall never have a career," said Paton lightly, aware of the soft, dark eyes on his face questioning him. But he did not meet them. Somehow they held a look in them to-day that he could not bear. "I don't concentrate, you know. I'm just 'a blooming amateur.' Gilbert was reading me a solemn lecture the other day, but—I go on the same old way. I'm glad, however, that Gilbert is getting on so well. But then, he does concentrate."

"He works very hard," said Claudia thoughtfully, "I had no idea how hard. He does too much, I think." Then she looked at the rather fine lines of the face be-

side her. "But I don't believe you are afraid of hard work. I remember how hard you worked when you were on that Hospital Committee."

"No, I don't think it's that," said Paton quietly. "Let's say it's lack of ambition and driving power."

Was there something in his tone that sent a vague shadow of distrust over Claudia's expression, or was it the echo of some secret misgiving in herself?

"Does that mean you think ambition—the ordinary get-to-the-top-of-the-tree ambition — rather commonplace?"

"Not a bit," he said heartily. "After all, we live on a commonplace earth. Gilbert is right and I am wrong, and when Gilbert is Lord Chief Justice and I'm an obscure old bore of a bachelor, I shall, no doubt, fully realize my wrongness. But do ask me to dinner sometimes."

"But you musn't remain a bachelor," said Claudia, with all the enthusiasm of the newly-engaged woman, "because your life will be incomplete. That sounds like sex conceit, but you said it yourself to me, and then I began to believe it. And now——" she completed the sentence with a charming blush.

"Can you imagine any modern woman wanting a man without worldly ambition, a man she will never be proud of, a man who is nothing and does nothing?" The tone was light enough, and the girl, engrossed in her own happiness, did not detect an unusual note of bitterness. For Colin Paton was never bitter. He could be sarcastic and even scathing when roused, but he never indulged in the refuge of cowardly souls.

Claudia took him quite seriously, for happiness, just as sorrow, may temporarily obscure a sense of humour. "I forbid you to say such things of yourself," she said, with an engaging air of motherliness. "You're awfully clever—awfully clever. Why, you are one of the best-

read and best-informed men in London." Suddenly she realized how often she had turned to him for information or advice. And she could never remember an occasion on which he had failed her, or an opinion that her critical faculty on reflection deemed unsound.

"No market value, dear lady."

She paused a moment thoughtfully. "Is that true?" she said slowly. "Gilbert said that the other day when I asked him if he had read something. He says he has no time for books, it's as much as he can do to read the newspapers.... Somehow it seems all wrong." She looked away with a puzzled expression at the trees of the Park.

He cast a quick glance at her profile and the beautiful lines of her throat. He seemed about to say something with unusual impetuosity, and then he resolutely locked his lips. He allowed her to go on speaking.

"Ambition gets in the way of—of a lot of other things, doesn't it? It seems a voracious dragon, swallowing up everything: friends, books, pictures—all the beautiful, graceful things of life. Isn't it a pity?"

"I think so; but then I'm in the minority."

"And that's why you are not ambitious," she flashed out with sudden insight. "Yes, I see. I wonder if you are right." Her voice was a little wistful.

"No," he said, with resolute reassurance. "No. I'm wrong, and Gilbert is right. Wife of the Lord Chief Justice—what greater honour could you wish?"

"Now you are making fun of me," she replied, with a tiny frown, "and I was quite serious. It's difficult to explain. But—well, I hate the usual sort of man who does nothing except wear his clothes well, don't you? Look at Jack. He sets off his uniform beautifully, but he just footles his life away. There doesn't seem anything between that and great strenuosity—except you. I can't place you. Somehow you always make me see

things in a different perspective from anyone else. I wonder why it is. Sometimes you make things seem better and sometimes you make them seem worse."

He drew in his breath a little and his hand in its thin suède covering clenched itself on his knee. "Claudia, you mustn't let me make things seem worse or any different from—what they are. I'd be content if my mission in life were to make things better, not worse, for you. Not that you want that now," he added hastily, pulling himself in. "I know, from things you have left unsaid, that your home life hasn't been all you wanted and ought to have had, but now—now you are going to be very happy. Gilbert is a splendid fellow."

She turned to him, her face glowing, her eyes deep and dark with emotion.

"Yes, I think I am going to be very happy. Somehow you have always understood. I have never had to tell you things. You see, nobody ever wanted me very much, and I—I wanted somebody to want me and to rely on me and care for my companionship. It is so wonderful to think that our interests are one, that what interests me interests him, that I can tell him my good news and bad news and be always sure that I don't bore him. I've always had to bottle up things. I've had one or two girl friends, but it isn't the same. And even then they get engaged and married and you fall in the background. But when I've got a husband of my own it will be different, won't it?"

He hesitated the fraction of a second. "Yes, Claudia, it will be different. You know how glad I am that you have found happiness, don't you? I wanted that so much for my—friend."

"And isn't it nice that I am marrying *your* friend?" she exclaimed joyfully. "Because you might not have liked my husband, or my husband might not have liked you. Oh, I know," sagely. "I have heard from my

friends who got married, that it is sometimes very difficult. But you and Gilbert are friends, and you and I are friends. It's quite ideal, isn't it?"

"Yes," he said cryptically, "quite ideal. The ideal is always the unattainable."

"But you must marry too," she persisted, "because I am sure I should like your wife. There are some men that one knows and likes that one feels doubtful about their choice of a wife, and there are others—like you—one is sure it will be all right." She laughed gaily. "Won't you get married to please me?"

No one could have guessed there was any effort in his laughing reply. "I know. You are planning to get rid of some obnoxious wedding-present on me, something especially hideous in the way of rose-bowls or tea-services. No, I absolutely refuse to accommodate you."

"Well, at least promise me to come back soon," she smiled as the motor stopped before the entrance to the galleries. "I shall want to discuss a thousand things with you long before you've got to the Argentine. I think I shall keep a little book and call it 'The Paton Diary.' In it I shall enter all sorts of queries and the names of books and pictures and music that I want to discuss with you."

"Heavens! I shall never come back!" Her hand rested in his as he helped her to alight, and she gave him a mischievous squeeze.

"No, but really."

"Really, I will come back as—soon as I can, and I shall be grateful if the 'Paton Diary' will keep my memory green.... I hear there is a wonderful Giorgione here. You remember those two we saw here last year...."

CHAPTER VI

'A MOTHERS' MEETING

OUR respected mother has what you would call a tarnished reputation." Pat said it in a mild and thoughtful manner, as she and Claudia exercised Billie in the Park to try and keep his figure within reasonable bounds.

"Pat!" exclaimed Claudia, abruptly recalled from her own thoughts. "You have no right to say such things." Sisters who are not yet out and three years one's junior must be kept in order.

"Why not? It's true, I suppose. I was sitting here among a lot of people yesterday and mother, drove by. The two women at the back began to talk. At first, I didn't know they were discussing mother, till they mentioned you. When they said 'Her daughter Claudia has just got engaged to Gilbert Currey, it's to be hoped she won't follow in her mother's footsteps,' I twigged."

"You shouldn't have listened," rebuked Claudia indignantly.

"Well, I was hedged in, and I should have had to plough my way over such a lot of feet to get away, and I couldn't turn round and say 'Excuse me, you're discussing my mother and sister,' could I?"

"I should have got up, feet or no feet," returned her sister.

"Mother seems to have had a pretty good time, according to these two women. They rattled off mother's amours with great gusto. They were alternately shocked and envious—the combination was funny."

"Nasty-minded gossips!"

"I should have liked to turn round and say 'Sour grapes.' I suppose mother *has* gone the pace. She's been a sort of Helen of Troy, hasn't she? Notorious for her temperament and beauty."

"Women like that always invent a lot of scandal." Claudia shrugged her shoulders. "It's a sort of convention with them to think that all women in society live immoral lives.... Billie, no, you mustn't bite little boys' legs. I know it's only in play, but they don't like it."

"Mother must have been stunning when she was young, in the days of the portrait," continued Pat reflectively. "If I had been a man I should have fallen in love with her. Nothing mild and namby-pamby for me, thank you. I've a good deal of sympathy with her, for father is a bore. Only I can't see how she could have been in love with so many men. Most men are so deadly uninspiring. I expect falling in love became a habit with mother."

"Really, Pat, I don't think we ought to discuss her."

"Why? Because she is our mother? But she doesn't feel like our mother—she told me so the other day—and she wouldn't mind our discussing her a bit, just as though she were next-door neighbour." Claudia could not contradict this, for Mrs. Iverson had never tried or wanted to be a mother to her children. The children had "happened" and been promptly relegated to the nursery. As soon as she was well she forgot them just as she forgot an annoying attack of influenza.

"Claudia, do you feel you could fall in love with a lot of men?"

"Pat! what awful questions you ask. I should think that——" She stopped herself. She was going to add, "No nice woman could fall in love with a lot of men," but this would reflect on her mother, and out of loyalty and decency she could not say it, rather for what her mother might have been to her than what she was. So she said instead, "I haven't thought about it, and if I were you, I shouldn't. You're too young to worry about sex problems. The little I have thought about them has only confused me; it seems such an enormous subject. One would have to be a Methuselah to have time enough to study it. I am sure threescore years and ten is too little."

"I suppose it is all a question of experience," said Pat slowly. "If only mother would tell us all she had learned! That would be better than all the silly morals and maxims that surround you like a barbed wire fence."

Claudia stole a glance at Pat as she strode along, her skin flushed by the warmth of the sun, her corn-coloured hair glowing under her big white hat. How much did Pat know of the things she discussed so lightly? How much did she herself know, for that matter. And yet, quietly and earnestly, she had been watching men and women since her *début* a year since. She had seen the fair surface and some of the dark undercurrent, she had kept her ears and her eyes open and her mind as far as possible unbiased, but what was the harvest? How much did she really *know*? She did not make the mistake of thinking men angels or devils, she tried, on Paton's advice, not to generalize—the temptation of youth—she knew that, on the whole, she liked the masculine sex better than her own, but what did she know that she could impart to a younger sister? As she looked at Pat, she wondered if she ought to try and

find out where Pat stood. Ought she to try and influence her sister in any way? Pat was such a queer mixture. Sometimes she talked like an overgrown, slangy schoolgirl, and the next minute she would speak with the callous knowledge of a woman of forty; sometimes she showed signs of deep affection and strong emotions, which again would give place to a curious aloofness and independence.

Lady Currey was coming to lunch that day with the Iversons, an event which Claudia dreaded. Mrs. Iverson had lazily decided that, under the circumstances, she ought to offer her some hospitality, and Lady Currey had felt it only right and fitting to accept. Her husband was confined to their house in the country with an attack of gout. Gilbert had pleaded that he was too busy to accompany her.

Punctually at half-past one—the clock was striking—Lady Currey arrived. Mrs. Iverson was not down yet, but she was never punctual, except when her clock was fast. Claudia had to receive Gilbert's mother.

She wanted to like her, but her heart sank a little at Lady Currey's formal greeting. Sometimes she had hoped—before she had considered Gilbert in the light of a possible husband—that when she married, her husband's mother might be someone to whom she could, and would be allowed to, feel daughterly. She knew it was rare, but she would meet a nice mother-in-law more than half way, for there was no holy of holies occupied by a real mother. One could ask Mrs. Iverson's advice on dress—not too often, because it bored her to give advice on any subject—but Claudia felt she had room in her heart for a nice cosy elderly woman, who might be a guide, philosopher and friend.

"Mother will be down directly," said Claudia, with a heightened colour. "Will you not take this chair? It is more comfortable than that one."

"Thank you, but I do not care for those low, padded chairs. They induce habits of indulgence. I was brought up to sit on hard, straight-backed chairs, so I never acquired the habit of lolling."

She looked critically round the drawing-room, which was full of graceful and beautiful things. At one end, looking down insolently upon her, was the famous Circe picture. It dominated the whole room. The only other pictures were landscapes, a couple of Olssons, an exquisite Whistler, which the artist had himself given to Mrs. Iverson, a Sisley and a small Cézanne. But they were all subservient to the glowing Circe in her wonderful clinging blue robes. The whole room had apparently been designed as a frame for the portrait, for it was a harmony of dull blues and faded pinks. A case of miniatures at her elbow contained some exquisite Cosway beauties and some rare scraps of old Venetian goldsmiths' work. Lady Currey caught sight of a Vernis Martin cabinet full of priceless Sèvres and some Chelsea figures that made the collector's mouth water. It was annoying to think that Sybil owned such china, for Lady Currey was sure she did not value it.

"You have some beautiful pieces here," she said to Claudia, crossing to look at the cabinet.

"Yes, I believe they are considered very fine. I am afraid I don't know much about china myself." If Claudia had only known it, her last chance was gone. Lady Currey's eyebrows went up in contempt. But the china was exquisite and avenged Claudia's slip.

Lady Currey turned away and glanced at the clock. Twenty to two! Where was her hostess?

The door opened, but it was only Patricia with Billie at her heels. "Billie was crying for you, Claudia. I let him loose. I thought you had forgotten him."

Claudia had instinctively felt that Lady Currey was

the type of woman who disapproved of dogs in the house, so she had tied him up.

Pat surveyed the visitor with her clear blue eyes. Very precise and a little dowdy did Lady Currey look that day. Her grey silk was a dull shade, her ornaments were valuable, but belonged to the day when diamonds were deeply embedded in gold, her toque was as near to a bonnet as she could buy. Pat took it all in and her lips said "prunes and prism" behind their visitor's back.

"Ripping day, isn't it?" she said affably. "Doesn't it make you feel as if you'd like to turn somersaults on the grass and yell like a wild Indian every time you come right side up?"

Claudia stifled a laugh at Lady Currey's expression.

Of course, Sybil's children would be terrible and lawless. She disliked anything so large and athletic as Pat, and privately thought that so much flesh and bone inclined to coarseness. She was of the small and tidy type herself.

"There's no way of letting off steam nowadays, is there?" continued Pat, unabashed by Lady Currey's stare, and crossing her legs so as to display a large expanse of silk-covered calf. "That's why people get into mischief. They boil up inside, sometimes you can *feel* the bubbles!"

"That's because you're a very young kettle," interposed Claudia hastily.

But at that moment—five minutes to two—Sybil Iverson glided into the room. Her figure was still wonderful, willowy and most seductive in its lissomness. She was wearing a dress that showed every curve of it, and the transparent guimpe of her bodice showed the gleam of her neck in a manner that Lady Currey found very indecent. Her hair, burnished and waved in a carefully negligent fashion, matched her slightly tinted complexion. The whole effect was pleasingly artificial, like that of

some rare orchid. She was still Circe—after a careful toilette.

"Ah! Marian, what a long time since we met! But you are just the same."

"We are both considerably older," said the companion of her girlhood with emphasis.

"Are we really? I have ceased to be a body, I am now only a spirit, and spirits know no age." She let her heavy lids drop over her eyes, a trick which Lady Currey had always disliked. "I have learned to project the soul into space and leave the body behind. Have you ever pierced through the intangible walls of the Unseen, Marian?"

"I attend regularly to my religious duties," said her visitor shortly, rather nonplussed by Circe's new attitude. Her flippancies she knew and could meet, but this was something that verged on her own preserves.

"Ah! that is not quite the same." The hostess smiled sweetly upon her. "But now we will go in to lunch. Gilbert is not coming, I think?"

"He has his work," said his mother. "You cannot expect such a man to dance attendance on a woman."

"Oh! I quite understand," interjected Claudia. "I did not expect he would come."

"He has the aura of a successful man," said Circe dreamily. "I saw it quite distinctly last night. But there was something mingled with it—I saw a vivid streak of purple——" She shook her head mysteriously and broke off the sentence.

"I shouldn't say there were any purple patches about Gilbert," smiled Claudia, across the rose-bowl.

"I do not understand the phrase," said Lady Currey acidly. "Will you explain it to me?"

Patricia gave an audible chuckle, and Claudia looked imploringly at her mother.

"Purple patches," Said Circe vaguely, "stand for all

the wonderful emotions and sensations that make this life a thing of magic and mystery. A purple patch—what is it? It may be a minute, a second even—the look from someone's eyes caught in a crowd—a chord of music—a whiff of perfume—an hour of passion—a day of memories—the song of a bird—anything rare and evanescent. Purple patches are moments of crystallization, of ecstasy, of poetry, of life; patches that glow in your heart for years and I think, even when you are dead shroud it in royal mourning.”

She came out of her dream and took the salmon mayonnaise that the butler had been patiently holding.

“I am glad to think there are no purple patches on my son,” said his mother dryly, dubbing her hostess “a mass of affectation.”

“No, I don't think a successful barrister would be likely to stray into Wonderland. Documents of the law, blue paper and crude red tape do not harmonize with purple, do they? Claudia, will you remember that when I die I want to be buried in purple silk and the coffin must be lined with a deep shade of crimson. I think I might select the colours when I have time. The wrong crimson would be so fatal to my hair.”

Billie suddenly gave a little howl from his seat on the sofa as though the conversation depressed him. Lady Currey looked her disapproval of him, and Claudia shushed him.

Then she tried to change the subject in deference to the dachshund's tender feelings.

“Isn't it delightful, Lady Currey? I had a letter from father's old friend, the Countess Ravogli, this morning, sending her congratulations and offering us her beautiful villa on the Lake of Como for the honeymoon. I have seen photographs of it, and it is too sweet for words.”

“Does Gilbert like the idea?”

"I haven't told him yet, but he is sure to like it. It is a sort of fairy castle with an enchanted garden full of wonderful sculpture and strange flowers. There is a terrace of white marble brought from Greece and a fountain of coloured waters. It must be perfectly delicious. I have always dreamed of it as an ideal honeymoon place."

"One must be very young to look well in such a place," said her mother. "The Countess tried to get me to visit her, but I declined. White marble is only suitable to the eternal youth of gods and goddesses and it is so chilly! A marble terrace always sounds delightful, but as a matter of fact it generally gives you cold feet and you have to fly in and demand hot-water bottles, and there is nothing romantic about a hot-water bottle."

"The drinking-water is so bad in Italy," remarked Lady Currey. "I do hope you will be careful."

After luncheon, Mrs. Iverson carried off Lady Currey to her boudoir on the plea of reviving old memories. Claudia was relieved, but surprised, for her mother seldom took any but her very special cronies into her private apartments.

Circe lit a cigarette—the room was already heavy with some Oriental perfume which made Lady Currey sniff—and made herself thoroughly comfortable and picturesque on a low divan. Lady Currey told herself that it was exactly like a room in a harem, never having been in one.

"It is strange your boy should be marrying my girl," commenced Mrs. Iverson, watching the pearly grey smoke rise in the air. "I confess I thought Claudia would have married quite differently." Her voice was dangerously sweet.

"Indeed," said Lady Currey. The perfume irritated her, and she felt a desire to sneeze.

"Yes, quite differently. But neither her father nor I would try to interfere with her choice. I have always

allowed my children full liberty of action. And though Claudia would have had an enviable position as the Duchess of Swansea, I recognize her right to choose as her heart dictates. I saw the Duke last night, and he was very downcast. He thought Claudia might relent. Charming fellow, isn't he?"

She opened her eyes blandly upon her visitor, and nothing but good will to men and contempt for women shone from them.

Lady Currey, who moved very little in London society now, did not personally know Swansea, but knew him to be one of the most eligible *partis* of the day. She had heard a vague rumour of Swansea's attentions to Claudia from another quarter and saw no reason to doubt Circe's news. She was nettled, and felt she was being placed in a false position. It revived old memories. Circe had possessed this trick as a young girl.

"Gilbert is bound to do well," she said hastily.

"Of course." Circe lit another cigarette. "But the future—well, it is the future! Futures are like horses—you can never count on them! If they could only invent automatic horses and automatic futures! Still, I have no doubt he will arrive one day, if Claudia is patient. Personally, I should have no patience to wait for a future."

"Gilbert will make an excellent husband." Lady Currey, to her great amazement, perceived that she was actually holding a brief for Gilbert. The thing was absurd.

"Oh, yes!" murmured her old friend vaguely. "But all the old-fashioned virtues are so out of date now, like four-wheelers and stage-coaches. The modern excellent husband is such a different article from what we called an excellent husband fifty years ago. I often think what a dreadful bore that good, old-fashioned husband must have been. I am sure those Early Victorian wives must

have died of their partners' excellences. Have you noticed how sad they always look in their portraits?"

"In my young days marriage was considered a sacrament," remarked Lady Currey stiffly, glancing out of the corner of her eye at a notable array of masculine portraits. "I consider the interpretation and shortening of the marriage service nowadays scandalous. The Bishop of Dorminster quite agrees with me."

"I am sure he would. If you sell patent medicines, you must believe in patent medicines.... Why don't you start a campaign against it? I can see you at the head of a flourishing Anti society. I would join it with pleasure, Marian."

Lady Currey stiffened. Gilbert has very nice ideas about women."

"What are nice ideas about women, Marian?"

"He treats women with respect and proper deference."

"How dull!" murmured Circe, looking at the portrait of a man who had not treated her with undue respect.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said how delightful. But I hope he can—er—offer Claudia something more than respect. I hope he appreciates her and can offer a good deal of love and admiration. Some people set a great store by love—I fancy Claudia does. You see, that would be the one thing—you will forgive my speaking frankly like an old friend—that would compensate her father and me for a less good match than we had the right to expect. We want her to be happy, but Claudia is very much admired. She has had many good offers—I know, though she hasn't told me—and I should feel a little sad if I thought Gilbert did not adore her. She is really rather a dear. I quite admire her myself, and I admire very few women."

There was a short pause while Lady Currey struggled for words.

"I—I believe he is very much in love with her," she said at last, flushing angrily.

"Ah! that is what I brought you up here to know. Love compensates for any worldly loss, does it not?... Dear Marian, I am afraid I must go out now, but it is charming to think that your son is going to marry Claudia. It reunites up again in the bonds of friendship. I am sure Gilbert is charming. Claudia is a lucky girl."

Lady Currey was not to be outdone. She rose primly in her grey silk.

"Claudia is very handsome. It is Gilbert who is lucky."

Thus ended a little Mothers' Meeting.

CHAPTER VII

"LOVE IS THE ONLY CONVENTION"

CLAUDIA was spending the week-end out of town at Holme Court, Wargrave, where one of her aunts, Mrs. Armesby Croft, always spent a good part of the summer. Gilbert had also been invited and her brother Jack, but Jack had refused to go.

She was coming down the stairs on the Friday morning and heard a familiar whistling. Jack's door was open, and the musical-comedy tune—rather flat—proceeded from his room.

"Jack, I do wish you wouldn't whistle so flat. Can't you get your whistle manicured, or something?"

"Hallo! Claud, that you? Come in, I'm nearly all there."

The late hours he habitually kept had not yet left any mark on Jack Iverson. This morning he looked wonderfully young and fresh, although he had not tumbled into bed until past three. Youth has a magnificent elasticity, and he looked like a modern god that has tubbed and shaved and is ready for a good breakfast.

"Why aren't you coming down to Wargrave?" inquired Claudia, sauntering into his apartment. "It's just the week-end for the river."

"Maybe I *am* going on the river," said Jack, with a knowing air, settling his tie in the mirror. "I've had on seven ties this morning. How's this one?"

"Looks all right. I don't notice anything wrong, so I suppose it's all right. That's the test of men's dressing, isn't it? Why not Wargrave?"

"Because, though Aunt Margaret is a clinking good sort and keeps a jolly good table, she is not a ravishing companion. You're only my sister, and—'nuff said."

Claudia looked at him, and her lip curled. "That means you are going up the river with a ravishing companion, I suppose?"

"Thou supposeth rightly, oh, wise one! She's just the most fascinating thing you ever struck."

"Which musical comedy?" queried Claudia, running her eyes over the collection of invitation cards and pretty women on his mantelshelf. The portraits had inscriptions on them of considerable fervour, and she noticed a family resemblance in the handwritings, which were either sprawly or very dashing, with huge flourishes at the end like a stockwhip in action.

"Never you mind. But she's a duck, the very thing for a steam-launch. Got the neatest thing in ankles you ever saw. Beastly taking a woman with thick ankles on the river. They're best hidden under a dinner-table."

"Can she talk about anything?" asked Claudia curiously, picking up a photograph of a smile and a shoulder.

"She can talk well enough when she wants to. Oh! I know! you, Claudia, we've had this discussion before. I've told you I don't like clever women. I hate a girl who wants to impress you and talks like a smart novel. Give me a nice, affectionate little thing who's got a string of funny stories and doesn't make too many demands on a fellow. She's worth a hundren clever women, with their soaring nonsense."

"Is she?" Claudia looked at him thoughtfully as he put his watch in his waistcoat. I often wonder why you and men like you prefer to spend your time with—well, affectionate little things, rather than with girls in your own set. Personally, I can't understand your taste. I

am sure these girls have common ways and petty thoughts. I couldn't stand a musical-comedy man for five minutes."

"Oh! that's different. The men are awful bounders; you're quite right. I'd like to see one of them make up to you!"

"Why is it so different?"

"Well, it is. I can't explain things like that to you, but it is. You're brainy, old girl, and I don't pretend to be brainy. A lot of good brains do a woman, unless she's a schoolmistress. Not that Ruby is stupid. She's—well, she's bright, if you know what I mean. She knows how to get what she wants, and knows her way about."

"The cleverness of the gamin," observed Claudia coolly.

"Well, anyway, she's clever enough for me. You can be easy and comfortable with her, and she's an amusing companion. Doesn't go in for moods and all that nonsense. I like 'em bright and chirpy, I confess. If you girls only knew how your confounded moods and fancies bore a fellow. Why, look at *you*. You're full of whims and fancies. You can be an awfully good companion if you like—none better; but one never knows what you will want the next moment. You women expect us to transpose ourselves to your key every few minutes. It's a damned nuisance, Claudia. Take my advice, don't try too many moods on with Gilbert."

"You think there is much in common between you and Gilbert?" Claudia's voice was sarcastic.

"Yes more than you think," flashed out Jack unexpectedly. "Oh! I know all about his brains, but otherwise he's much the same as me. He doesn't care enough about women generally to make a study of 'em."

"I'm glad of that."

"He's too indifferent, and I'm too lazy," continued young Iverson, bent on pursuing his train of thought.

"I daresay women are nice to me because I've got plenty of money—you are right in some cases—but as long as they are nice, what matters?"

"From your point of view, not at all, if you only want a woman as a mere plaything, to smile automatically the moment you appear, and produce a funny story when you turn a handle. You want a doll, Jack, not a woman, a pretty, jointed doll, that squeaks 'darling' when you come up to it, and which you can pick up when you like and drop when you like."

"My dear girl," said Jack, with a condescending smile "you can't understand. Women never do understand these things. They talk a lot about sex nowadays, but it's all talk. The proposition is quite a simple one, if you women wouldn't wrap it up with complexities."

"Well, I'm glad I don't understand," she returned warmly. "And if I were a man I don't think I should understand either. I hope I should be more fastidious." She pounced on a jeweller's morocco case. "Hallo! May I look, Jack?"

Jack nodded. He rather liked Claudia when she was not too brainy and analytical.

She opened the case with a click. It contained a very handsome pendant with pearl drop and a big ruby in the centre.

"Pretty, isn't it?" said Jack complacently. "The ruby was my own idea—her name—d'yer see?"

"Quite subtle," said Claudia gravely; "but I daresay, if you explain it, she'll see the point."

"Eh? Oh, well! they like a little present occasionally. And if you saw her pleasure at anything you give her—well, you feel you want to go and buy her the whole shopfull at once."

"H'm. I think I was wrong in suggesting she was not clever. Let's go down to breakfast, Jacky."

"You see," said Jack confidentially, as they went down

the stairs, "a fellow likes to be appreciated. You remember that, my dear, now you are going to be married. Don't have any moods, and always be appreciative and bright. That does the trick every time. Take my advice."

"Thank you. I'll be sure and remember. Appreciative and bright. I might have it framed."

"Don't you fancy I don't know anything about women. You're a nut, Claudia, I admire you no end, but really you make too great demands on a chap. Come on, I could eat a tin can this morning."

Later that day Claudia was lying very comfortably in a big wicker chair under an old elm-tree at Holme Court, when Gilbert arrived. He looked noticeably tired and fagged, for the week had been a very hot one, and he had been hard at it. He did not specially remark the pretty picture she made in her cool white linen against the green background, but he appreciated the shade of the elm. His chambers were abominably stuffy.

"Poor boy!" said Claudia softly. "Your're tired, I can see. I'll be soothing. You don't want me to tell funny stories, do you?"

Gilbert's eyes opened in blank surprise, but he caught the twinkle in her eyes, and the smouldering laugh in the corners of her mouth as she watched him. He knew there was a joke somewhere, but he was much too hot and tired to worry it out. Instead he looked at Claudia's mouth, which was soft and red, with a most provocative pout.

"It's too warm even to laugh. But it's nice and cool here." He dropped into a chair with a huge sigh of content.

"We are all alone here," said Claudia happily. "The others have gone on the river, but I waited for you." There was no one in sight except a couple of birds hopping about in search of a worm. "I am going to give you

some tea out here, and then we will go down and get one of the boats out." She dropped a kiss on his hair, which already had several silver threads in it. "I thought I'd stop and mother a poor tired boy! Somehow—wasn't it ridiculous of me?—I fancied you would like to have me all to yourself." She laughed a little. "It's rather nice to have someone to pet and fuss over. I've never had anyone who would let me do it. Mother hates us even to kiss her—we do it once a year, at Christmas, when we thank her for her present—and Pat is too tom-boyish to like being petted. I had to fall back on Billie. He can stand any amount of it, but still—well, he's only a dog."

"Does that mean I have cut out Billie," said Gilbert lazily. Her hands, with their soft, rather mesmeric fingertips, gave him agreeable sensations in keeping with idle hours and summer days.

"No, it doesn't. As a matter of fact I feel so happy that I could pet the whole world!"

"A tall order! But, I say, I'd rather you didn't do it to the masculine half. They might misunderstand your mothering instinct."

She laughed and dropped another kiss on his hair before she went back to her seat among the cushions. Involuntarily he put up his hand and smoothed his hair, which was in no way disturbed. It was thick and straight, and spoke of his abundant energy.

"Gilbert! Don't brush my kisses off. You are ungallant."

"Sorry, dear. I didn't mean to brush them off, but a man hates the idea that his hair has got ruffled."

"That's because you are afraid of looking ridiculous! Men are very dignified animals, aren't they? I believe you're a particularly dignified, conventional specimen!"

The maid was approaching with the tea-tray. As she came across the lawn, the silver caught the rays of the

sun and threw them back in radiant shafts of light. The maid's cap and apron seemed dazzlingly white against the green and blue of the sky and garden.

"Of course, I'm conventional," responded Gilbert. "Haven't you discovered that before? Only weak people are unconventional."

Claudia pondered this saying as she watched the maid arrange the table.

"I don't believe that is altogether true," she said at length, taking hold of the teapot.

"Of course not. Nothing is altogether true and nothing is altogether false. Plenty of milk, please."

"I don't believe I have a conventional, tidy mind. I can imagine myself doing quite unconventional things, and I don't believe I should realize they were unconventional till I looked back."

"That's having no mind at all." He looked at her teasingly. "The little pink abominations out of the cake-basket, please."

"And then you'd be terribly shocked and put on your barrister air, and say 'Didn't you know that...?' You don't altogether hold a brief for conventionality, do you?"

"It's the safest and most convenient path," he said, stirring his tea. "Personally, I have no quarrel with convention."

"Don't you believe that circumstances may sometimes force you to do unconventional things when convention means death to the spirit?"

"I make allowances for weakness, because weakness is the rule and strength the exception. The world gets weaker-willed and more neurotic every day. That's why one hears so much talk of 'individuality,' 'independence,' et cetera. More cake, please."

Claudia shook her head, not at the request for more cake, but at his dicta.

"That's not right. You are making no allowance for temperament. Sometimes it's really brave to be unconventional."

"More often weak and cowardly," retorted Gilbert, "and the unconventional people usually put other people in a hopeless mess."

"I don't believe you were ever tempted to do anything unconventional." Claudia looked at him, and it crossed her mind that he was very unlike her mother's friends.

"No, I don't pretend to have withstood great temptations in that line. 'Trespassers will be prosecuted' doesn't enrage me. I put the same notice-board on my own property, and am content."

"I see. Will that notice-board cover—your wife?" She was smiling at him, but there was a hint of earnest in the dark eyes.

"Most certainly, madam. The rest of the world may admire you—from a safe distance." He found her looking very pretty behind the silver, the sun through the green branches just flecking her hair. "I warn you I should not make a complaisant husband if I found someone trespassing." He laughed as he said it, but there was a decided champ of his jaws, which she noticed and secretly admired.

"And I shouldn't be marrying you if I thought you would," she replied, with a sudden touch of fire in her voice. "One sees so much of that and it is so—so horrible. One despises the husband more than the wife." Then she went on more slowly. "I think most women feel the same about it, although they say they want perfect freedom in such matters. Women are playing a game of bluff nowadays. They don't want a husband to be complaisant."

He looked across at her, and his mother's warnings came back to him. Claudia like her mother? Why,

she had just naively acknowledged that she only wanted to be dominated by a strong man. Geoffrey Iverson had always been a slackster. A weak man makes a Circe. If a man cannot hold a woman, he deserves and must expect to lose her. Life to-day is not so far removed from savagery after all. The strong man always wins. And had he not won so far all along the line? Had he not taken and kept all that he needed? His mother did not understand that there was no cause to fear. A palmist had once told him that he possessed an indomitable will. He knew that she was right. His thoughts flew back, induced by the peace and quiet, to the last few years at the Bar. He had out-distanced all his rivals. Men who had eaten their dinners at the same time as he well still unknown, briefless. And some of them had shown brilliant promise, some of them had worked hard, too. He knew that already, although he was so young, there was a rumour that he might shortly be taking silk.

Claudia, her chin propped on the palm of her hand, had been watching him, and with a woman's swift uncanny intuition she knew that he had ceased to think of her, that she had lost touch with him. With a touch of jealousy she cried:

"Gilbert, come back to me. Of what were you thinking?"

He came back at once, but without the faintest comprehension that she had felt left out in the cold, had divined that she had a serious rival.

"Suppose I say I was thinking of nothing in particular?"

She shook her head. "It wouldn't be true. You were thinking of something that pleased you and—and interested you enormously. Your eyes were dark with thought, and there was a glint in them—Ah! you were back in your chambers with your briefs?"

He laughed.

"Yes, I was right. You had deliberately left this sweet, sunny garden and—and me, and gone back to those stuffy chambers. We haven't seen one another for four days, and you'd gone back to your work."

There was an edge to her voice that roused him.

"Claudia, dear, I am very happy here with you, but one can't control one's thoughts or shut watertight doors on one's affairs. A woman's life is different. Men cannot help mingling their business with their pleasure."

"You mean we have nothing else to think of but you?" She threw up her head at an angle which was particularly becoming, and showed the softness and whiteness of her throat in the collarless dress.

"No," he said, "but you haven't any big objective in life. My dear Claudia, if you understood the keen competition nowadays, you wouldn't mind a man's thoughts straying back to the fray. You don't really, you are much too clever to want a stupid, love-sick swain who can talk or think of nothing else but love. You have said many times that you are in complete sympathy with my ambitions. Don't be feminine and illogical. I was flattering myself"—he put his hand on hers with his most engaging smile—"that I had won a super-feminine and logical wife."

"I am in sympathy with you Gilbert." She carefully kept her eyes from his face, as though that would break the chain of her thoughts. "And I don't want you to be a stupid, love-sick swain, but——" How could she make him understand without seeming petty and unreasonable? "Gilbert," she went on quickly, determined to say frankly what she was thinking, "is everything in your life subservient to your work? Sometimes you talk as if everything else—as though we were the rungs upon which you mounted the ladder. When you talk of wasting time—things being trivial and not worth while—your face becomes so contemptuous and hard

and engrossed it makes me frightened. I want you to have a career; I wouldn't have married an idle man. I will help you in every way I can; I shan't expect impossible attention—but, Gilbert, I want our marriage to mean something to you, a big something."

She paused for breath, and he opened his lips to speak, but she signed to him to be silent.

"Let me finish. I couldn't bear to think that your work was everything to you, and that I—I was merely the *Hausfrau* that bore your name and sat at your table. It might be enough for some women, but it wouldn't be enough for me. I warn you that if you ever let me drop into the background of life I—I don't know what I might not do. I told you just now that I wasn't conventional. Love is the only convention that I own. Gilbert, tell me something quite truthfully. If I am asking things you can't give me, let us break off the engagement before it is too late. I want"—her voice broke a little and her eyes were dimmed with feeling—"I want a great deal of love. I've never had it, you know, and I—I'm so hungry. If I didn't love you, I shouldn't be talking like this. You know I love you; but you—you—Gilbert——"

She had risen from her seat and faced him. She was very much in earnest, and her mouth trembled like a child's. Her full, rounded bosoms under the linen and lace heaved with her quick heart-beats; her eyes asked piteously for love.

She was very beautiful in that moment. She was young and fresh and fragrant, with not a touch of artifice about her. There was no man alive that would not have been touched by her beautiful, pleading eyes. She promised so much. The hint of passion in her eyes and colouring would have allured any man, and Gilbert was by nature a passionate animal. Passion and ambition had

warred from his youth, and he had deliberately crushed out his warm human instincts. Until he met Claudia they had been absolutely under control. Now, as on the night he had proposed to her, something swept over him like a huge wave and swamped his brain. He only knew that he desired this girl and that he had never been thwarted in anything he had set his heart upon. He did love her; what more could she want? She was young and immature; she did not understand that man's feelings may be the deeper for not finding constant expression. Later, when they were married, she would understand better.

He forgot they were in the garden of Holme Court—in his cooler moments he was desperately afraid of any demonstrations of affection—and he sprang to his feet and caught her in his strong arms. He showered kisses on her passionate, trembling lips, kisses that sent a wild thrill of fearful joy through her, that made the placid, sunny garden rock and reel before her eyes, and gave her a vivid glimpse of what marriage might mean. And no man had ever roused her passions before. This man had always had the power to do so since the dinner-party when he had held her hand in his and asked if he might claim the privileges of old friendship and call her Claudia. Something had stirred uneasily then.

"If—if he has this power over me, if he can rouse the woman in me," she reasoned, "he must be the right man, the man I should marry." It was the simple, true mating of Nature. Surely, surely all would be well?

"You do—you do love me very much, don't you? I am more to you than your work?"

Her lips had intoxicated him so that he would have told her any lie so that she did not elude him. But he really thought he was speaking the truth, that there was something more than mere sex attraction between them.

"Yes, yes," he cried fiercely, with the conquering note

of the male; "can't you feel?—don't you know?—kiss me, kiss me——"

It was several minutes before they went back to the pink abominations and the more sober discussion of their wedding.

PART II

CHAPTER I

EN ROUTE

YES, Mrs. Currey was "at home," the butler admitted, opening the doors hospitably.

By the hats and overcoats lying about the spacious hall of their flat in Albert Hall Mansions, Carey Image knew he was not the only man who had hastened to congratulate Claudia on her husband's latest honour. He had seen the announcement in the papers that morning. Gilbert Currey had been made a K.C. Image immediately sent a wire to his chambers, and now in person was giving himself the pleasure of calling on his "god-daughter by marriage," as he called her.

The honour was no surprise to anyone; for the last year or more rumour had marked him out for this distinction. There had even been vague whispers of coming glory in the church at his wedding, eighteen months before. But now Gilbert had stepped into the vacancy left by the death of Howard Barnes, that blunt and sarcastic personality who, under a forbidding exterior, had hidden the heart of a child.

Image had seen very little of the pair since their marriage, for he who has once roamed in the Orient never settles down for long in the dull, tidy lands of the West, and though Cary Image had fully intended to stop in England, he had broken his resolve a few weeks

after the ceremony. Japan with her slender golden fingers had beckoned him and he had gone back to the land of almond blossom and universal courtesy.

The room overlooking the Park which he entered, unusually large and lofty for a London flat, seemed crowded to his near-sighted eyes. There was an animated chatter of voices, for Claudia had already gathered around her an amusing and socially attractive set, who talked well and easily, and required but little "managing." Images's bright eyes peered out through his eye-glasses in search of his hostess.

She soon came towards him with her most hospitable and welcoming smile. She was always pleased to see him or receive one of his long, descriptive letters. She liked him and she liked his life-story. Gilbert generally spoke of him a little slightly.

"Welcome, godfather; I'm delighted to see you. You've neglected me shamefully of late. From what part of the world have you come?"

"Last of all from Paris, *chère madame*, and this morning I saw the announcement in the paper. Gilbert is forging ahead. My heartiest congratulations to his charming partner. What could one not hope to do with such a one!"

She listened with a conventional smile, but her eyes did not warm to any enthusiasm as she said lightly, "Thank you, but I have had nothing to do with it. Such a *partner* as I"—there was a slight emphasis on the word—"is not entitled to claim any share in the congratulations."

"That is not true," said Image warmly; "a wife is the closest and best partner a man can have; and I am sure, if the truth were known, that most of our famous men owed much of their success to their wives' co-operation. The partner in the house is often far more important than the partner in the office."

"Mr. Image, you really are the most refreshing person," said a studiously lazy voice from under an enormous mass of lancer plumes at his left. "Isn't he, Claudia? You are the one faithful appreciative soul in a multitude of scoffers howling in the wilderness. You almost induce a woman to believe in herself."

Image laughed and peered under the feathery erection to discover that it was Rhoda Carnegie, a cousin of Claudia's and a woman he had known in Society for many years. She was married to an unsuccessful playwright, a "one play" man, who on the strength of a singleton had induced her to marry him, to their mutual regret. Some people raved about her beauty in superlatives, while others merely dubbed her "queer-looking." No one refrained from expressing an opinion about her. Her looks and manners were of the arrogant "I-must-be-obeyed" order, and she had a reputation for being irresistible where she chose to charm.

"Ah! Mrs. Carnegie, I could not see who it was. How do you do? I am so glad you agree with me."

"I don't in the least," she responded languidly, through half-shut eyes. "It's only bad women who play a big part in men's lives; that's why I gave up being good. The nice, virtuous, sympathetic wife is—just a super most of the time, unnoticed in the wings. And who wants to be super?"

With a careless laugh Claudia moved away to greet a new arrival. Rhoda Carnegie watched her with a sort of detached, cold-blooded speculation.

"Claudia was never cut out to be a super. I see signs that she will shortly get beyond that stage, for Gilbert gives no one a chance to distinguish himself. He always plays lead. But Claudia is not her mother's daughter for nothing," she drawled, playing with a set of golden baubles in her lap. She had but a small income of her own and her husband had less, but Rhoda Carnegie was

noted for her extravagance. How she got her very handsome toilettes was a mystery. At least, perhaps it was not an insolvable one to those who knew her well; but a mystery is always more decent than a scandal.

Image listened, rather startled. Then he remembered the type of woman to whom he was speaking. It was said that she made an art of demolishing reputations in as few words as possible.

"I find her looking exceedingly well," he said, trying to change the subject; "and you, also," he added courteously.

She looked up at him through her narrow slits of eyes, a trick which some men found fascinating.

"Claudia is the type that goes on getting better-looking until she arrives at the age of fifty, then she remains handsome and distinguished, especially when her hair gets white. It's a good job our styles don't clash, or I should have to avoid her. But we are quite different. She is the charming, sympathetic, give-all type which has its admirers, and I—I hold men with a whip, which I don't hesitate to use. You know the play *Doormats*? Well, I am the boot." She laughed insolently. "Now *you* like the Claudia type. So does Frank Hamilton."

"Frank Hamilton? Is that the new artist that——"

"Yes, Claudia has made a success of him. She first introduced him socially, and they say he is deluged with commissions for portraits. He isn't as strong as Sargent or Lavery, and I shouldn't wonder if he fizzles out, but he has a trick of pleasing his sitters and doing very graceful work. I believe he is doing a portrait of Claudia. That is he over there."

She pointed quite openly with her fingers to a young man who stood at Claudia's elbow, holding some cigarettes. There was something in his very attitude that suggested his admiration for his hostess.

Image saw a tall, broad-shouldered, but loose-jointed

figure, that spoke more of the studio than the cricket-field. His features were good, graceful rather than strong, and the whole face, he could see, would be one that would please women. His hazel eyes had an appealing, rather wistful look in them, and his mouth, if rather weak, spoke of a taste for and appreciation of beauty and luxury.

"Claudia should prove a good subject for his brush," said Image, exchanging a nod with a foreign diplomatist whom he knew. "I have heard people speak of him and predict great things for his future."

"Mostly women, I suppose? Women like him and men—are not keen about him. But then he's not keen on them. Women fill the bill. A good many of them are taking him up, and I don't think his head can stand it. He hates me like poison. He loves to talk about himself, and I love and intend to talk about myself. He told a dear friend of mine, who never loses an opportunity of repeating the nasty things that are said about me, that I had the eyes of a Lucretia Borgia."

"I have always wondered what colour they really are," said Image, playing up to her obvious lead.

She smiled. "Continue—to wonder! That is the way to make men think about you. An ounce of conjecture is worth a hundredweight of knowledge where women are concerned.... Good gracious, Patricia, is there any more of you to unwind? I thought it was a boa-constrictor standing on his hind legs. Haven't you stopped growing?"

"In stature—yes." She was more of an Amazon than ever as she rose from somewhere behind the piano. She gripped Image by the hand, and it was a real grip.

"How about goodness?" queried Rhoda.

"A non-starter—the handicap frightens me. We are not a good family, you know.... What a lot of people and congratulations! I should have thought Gilbert

might have got home early to have relieved his wife's blushes, and given himself a sort of holiday treat."

"Working as hard as ever?"

"Harder. I annoyed him the other day by predicting a nerve-breakdown—he was playing golf so badly—in a couple of years. And that same night at dinner he was so dead tired or cross that he hardly said a word, and I was left to talk to a boy I'd refused the night before. He was sulky and devoted himself to his food. I had a beastly time. I told Gilbert that he fancied he was an indestructible machine, and that he would find he wasn't. Anyway, he hates dinner-parties, and he begins to show it in his manners."

"If I were Claudia I should leave him at home," said Rhoda coolly. "I always leave mine at home. I tell people not to invite him. A husband is always the skeleton at the feast."

"Why have a husband at all?" said Pat lightly, who knew her Rhoda.

"It's a bad habit we shall outgrow in time, like needle-work and charity. A husband is like your appendix. When you don't know it's there, it's no use, and when you do, it's a nuisance."

"Had any tea?" inquired Patricia of Image.

"No, will you take me and give me some?" They walked together to the next room. "Dear me, would you mind hobbling on your knees, or providing me with stilts? After the miniature women of Japan you take my breath away. The modern Englishwoman is really a glorious creature."

Pat laughed amiably. "I'm a sort of yard-measure, aren't I? It's a nuisance really, except when you get in a crowd. Mother winces every time she sees me, and father says my feet are larger than his."

But Image looked admiringly at her over the edge of his tea-cup. To him this fine young girl, so amazingly

fresh and healthy, Saxon in colouring, with the limbs of an athlete, was most attractive, though he knew she made his own lack of inches more conspicuous.

"I suppose we shall have you getting married soon?" he said, beaming on her through his glasses.

Patricia shrugged her broad shoulders and nibbled at a sandwich. "Didn't you hear Rhoda say that we women are getting out of the habit?"

"She talks a lot of nonsense. Don't listen to it. You are much too fresh and sweet to repeat such horrible cynicism."

"We are all cynical nowadays. How is it you have escaped? How have you managed to keep on believing in people and things?"

Image answered quite simply and directly. "By loving a woman, my dear. To love a woman well keeps the core of a man's heart from withering and getting old. My blessings on all your sex, even a Rhoda Carnegie, because of *her*."

It was said so naturally that Patricia, who, like all young things, recoiled from any display of sentiment, could not find any fault with the frankness with which he had replied to her question. She became a little graver, and whether by accident or the prompting of some hidden association of ideas, she glanced up at the opposite wall, where hung a portrait of Gilbert, a wedding-present from the tenants on his father's estate.

"Ah!" she said impulsively, "but why, then, do so many marriages go wrong? They seem so right beforehand, and then——" She checked herself suddenly and shot a sideways look at the little man beside her, like a child who fears she has betrayed a cherished secret. But though Image's mind was full of alarm at what he felt lay between the lines, he gave no sign that Pat could have had any personal implication in her mind. To Pat's relief, Frank Hamilton came in for some tea, and she

seized upon him and made him known to Carey Image.

"I am delighted to make your acquaintance," said Image, with his old-world formality. "I have heard your praises sung, but never found myself in your company before. I saw one of your portraits photographed for an illustrated paper I found in Japan. I understand you are engaged on a portrait of our hostess?"

Hamilton's face, which had been full of pleased attention—Rhoda said he swallowed praise as a baby swallows milk—clouded a little. Then he replied with an engaging air of frankness.

"To tell you the truth, I have not been successful so far. She is a most difficult subject, though a delightful one. I have already destroyed one portrait and several studies. I think she is tired of my efforts, for I cannot persuade her to come to the studio for sittings. And I want *so much* to get a good portrait of her."

Image nodded understandingly. "Yes, I should say Mrs. Currey would be a difficult subject. Her greatest charm is in her animation and spirit, and those qualities are always difficult to transfer to canvas. And such people always appear different to each of their friends, so that a popular success is, I should say, almost impossible. It is before the cow-like, plaster-of-paris woman that people throw up their hands and say 'How like!'"

"I see you know something about the art of portrait-painting," said Hamilton, looking pleased.

"He knows something about everything," exclaimed Pat. "He's a walking index and encyclopædia, a Who's Who and a Dictionary of National Biography all combined."

Claudia came up and caught the last words.

"He's nothing so dull and uninteresting. It's a deadly insult, godfather. Up, sir, and at Patricia."

"How can I?" said Image humorously. "Just look at

us! I shall have to get some of the mushroom that Alice nibbled before I fight your sister."

"Oh! but the pen is mightier than the sword! Annihilate her with an epigram; that's much more deadly, because your enemies go round repeating it," said Claudia gaily. Image noticed that Hamilton was feasting his eyes on her face and that Claudia seemed rather to avoid looking at him. Image received the impression that she was used to his homage and did not either actively encourage or resent it.

"Such bad form," jeered Pat. "Everyone epigram-mates nowadays, and you never have the least idea what anyone is talking about. You answer in the same strain, and you wonder what on earth you yourself are talking about. Anyone can get a reputation for being clever, if he's only vague and wild enough in his conversation."

In the general laugh at Patricia the group shifted, and Image found himself alone with Claudia. She smiled upon him frankly and said with obvious sincerity:

"It's so nice to see you again. Don't run away for a while. By and by, I expect another friend back from 'furrin parts abroad.' You remember Colin Paton?"

"Indeed, yes, and shall be glad to see him again."

"So shall I. He's such an excellent and satisfying companion. A 'collectable' person, you know. At least," she added, with a slight change of tone, "I used to find him so."

"That sounds a little like granny, with her 'When I was young, my dear, I used to——'"

Claudia laughed. "Oh well! friends change, even in eighteen months, or else it is that one changes one's self, and friends seem different, judged by different standards. Eighteen months may be a day—or an eternity. He went away just before our wedding, you know. He has written me some most delightful letters at intervals since. He is

one of the few men who can write something more than a telegram."

Although he did not appear to be doing so, the keen eyes of her companion were scrutinizing her face as she talked. In middle-age or its borderland lines tell their tale for all to read, massage she ever so assiduously, but the changes in a young face are much more subtle and difficult to classify. But to a student of physiognomy like Carey Image there is sometimes a hint conveyed in the softest curve, a suggestion in an apparently sunny smile, a warning in the glance of brilliantly youthful eyes, such as were now confronting him.

She was not satisfied, she was not happy. The eyes had lost a little of the eager, questioning softness he had noticed in the photograph in Gilbert's room two years ago, and the mouth had acquired a little more decisiveness and an inclination toward sarcasm rather than smiles. Her whole bearing was much more assured, much more the woman of the world, the woman who has eaten of the Tree of Knowledge. But Image knew that she had not found that fruit altogether sweet. And he was profoundly sorry. He would have been sorry to have read that information on any young man or woman's face for he always wanted the world to be a more joyful place, but he particularly liked his young hostess. He saw in Claudia the bud that has blossomed but has never been warmed by the good red sun, so that the petals at the heart are still cold and unopened. And with the kindly wisdom of his fifty-four years, Image knew that this spelt danger ahead.

They chatted on, Claudia questioning him about his wanderings abroad, until they were interrupted by one of the servants.

"The master has just rung up, madam. to say that he cannot get back this evening in time to accompany you out to Hampstead to-night, and will you please make his apologies to Mrs. Rivington."

Claudia listened with a curious compression of her lips, like someone who listens with irritation to a too frequently told tale. Then she made a quick movement towards the door.

"I must speak to him myself. It's too bad. Mrs. Rivington——"

Then she stopped short, as though second thoughts had put a check on her impulse. She came back to Image with a resigned shrug of her shoulders.

"It really is too bad of Gilbert. I spend half my time making apologies for him and meekly bearing the ill-temper of my hostess whose table has been disarranged." Yet she looked anything but meek as she said it. "I am sure people will soon cease to ask us, because it *is* annoying to have your table upset at the last minute. It would try the patience of a hostess in heaven. Mrs. Rivington will be furious. She has asked us several times and we've refused.... Oh, well! I must go and telephone at once. That's the only peace-offering and oblation I can make."

"Let me go, Claud," said Patricia; "you can't leave your guests, and as she is a stranger to me, her wrath will pass harmlessly over my head."

Claudia accepted the offer with relief. "You'll find the number under Major-General Rivington, Newcombe Avenue. I say, Pat, suggest that, as Gilbert can't come, I shall absent myself also." Hopefully. "Perhaps she'll let me off, as they are Gilbert's friends rather than mine. Get me a reprieve if you can. It's in the wilds of West Hampstead, and it's such a long drive for a bad dinner."

"Right-o! I'll be a perfect Machiavelli on the telephone," sang out Pat as she departed.

Dr. Fritz Neeburg, who was sitting near by, looked up as Pat went. "Is Gilbert in the habit of working in the evening, Mrs Currey?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, pretty often, Dr. Neeburg. Do you approve of it? You are his doctor, aren't you?"

"Yes, but he hasn't been to see me for ages, so I suppose he keeps pretty fit. All the same, I don't approve of it."

"He's looking very tired," said Claudia lightly. "Last night he did go out with me to a party at the 'Ritz,' but he was too tired to talk. I am sure the woman who sat next to him must be going about saying that the new K.C. is the dullest man in London."

"I must talk to him," said Neeburg decidedly. "He's just the sort of a man who has a splendid constitution and takes that as an excuse for overwork. When a man gets into the habit of thinking of himself as a machine Nature has a little way of avenging such slights."

"Mrs. Currey, give him a curtain lecture," said Image.

Claudia's lip curled a little and she raised her eyebrows. "You can't curtain-lecture a man who listens in silence and then says, like putting in the cork, 'You don't understand. Women never do. A man who wants to make his way nowadays must devote himself whole-heartedly to his work. The world is strewn with the wreckage of men who have relaxed too soon or "taken holidays."'"

Patricia has returned.

"Claudia, I did my best, and even spoke quite plainly; but I couldn't get you off. She was very cross indeed. Her voice through the telephone was like that of an angry mosquito. She says *you*, at least, must come, and she wants you to bring a substitute. She suggested that Mr. Hamilton should come out with you, as she wants to make his acquaintance."

Claudia spoke coldly. "I can't ask Mr. Hamilton, or anyone, to take Gilbert's place at a couple of hours' notice,"

"No, I told her that, but she seemed to think you ought to get her out of the difficulty with the table."

She did not tell her sister that Lorna Rivington's

rather sharp reply had been, "Your sister and he are such great friends that I am sure he would do it if she asked him." Instead she whispered in her sister's ear, "Why don't you ask Mr. Image? He is such a nice, obliging dear."

Because her feelings were divided between an unreasonable anger that Mrs. Rivington should make such a suggestion and a pleasurable relief that her long drive might not be so boresome after all, she seized on the alternative suggestion.

"Mr. Image, you have heard of my dilemma. Would you earn the martyr's crown and take me out to Hampstead? It's too bad to ask you at such short notice, but——"

"I should have been only too pleased," returned Image, with a note of sincere regret, "but it is the anniversary of my mother's death, and I always spend the evening quite quietly. At any other time, if such a situation occurs and I can fill the bill, ring me up and just give me time to dress. But you must give me an hour—I can't do it in less." It was well known that Carey Image took an age to attire himself. His neat, precise personal habits and leisurely methods of dressing were a constant amusement to his friends and a handle to his—very few—enemies.

Several people came up to make their adieux, among them Frank Hamilton.

"Why are you going so soon?" asked Claudia of him, for he had lately slipped into the habit of outstaying other visitors and waiting for a talk with her.

"I promised to go to Ealing to-night," he said with a self-pitying sigh.

"Ealing," said Claudia vaguely. "Where is that? Then it's no good asking you to come out with me this evening? My husband is detained at his chambers and

"I want a substitute." She was conscious of a slight sense of disappointment, though she had fully made up her mind a minute previously not to ask Hamilton.

"Yes, it is," he said eagerly. "I can send a wire."

"But your engagement?"

"Of no importance. I can easily go some other night. Old friends.... If you will have me I am entirely at your service."

He looked into her eyes with his, over which he had not troubled to draw the blinds of conventionality. They underlined and emphasized the spoken words so that no woman could fail to understand. And she felt a pleasing sensation of power as she parried his devotion. She did not acknowledge it to herself, but she was subtly aware that they were both on the brink of deep waters. His eyes had spoken words of love for many weeks. His very *naïveté* and boyishness had its attraction for her. He was just as easy to move as Gilbert was difficult. She could colour his thoughts, deflect his mind, bring him instantly inside the circle of her mood. He took his colour from her like a chameleon, and she did not stop to consider whether she alone had this power, or if Frank Hamilton were always so influenced by attractive women.

"Very well, then," she said, holding out her hand, "You are bidden to take dinner at the house of one Major-General Rivington, who served Her Majesty Queen Victoria with great distinction, and is now resting on his laurels in the wilds of West Hampstead. Come for me at half-past seven."

CHAPTER II

“LIVE! LIVE! LIVE!”

CLAUDIA did not belong to the tribe of unpunctual women who stretch the minutes at their will and snap derisive fingers at Greenwich. The person who was unpunctual in their house was its master. That, however, was not due to carelessness, but to his uncertain calls. Often it was Claudia who, when the motor was at the door, sat down in her cloak and waited for her spouse.

So this evening she was ready in good time. It wanted still a few minutes to the half-hour when she cast a last critical look at herself in the mirror.

She was one of those women whom a *décolleté* dress shows at their best, and Claudia knew, as she surveyed herself, that the result was good. She was as little conceited as any of her sex—she had too much brain and good looks for that; but she could not fail to see that the gown she was wearing for the first time made her look strikingly handsome in the best and most individual way. It was as though the creator of the gown had loved his task, for the deep orange of the rich yet light-weight fabric, softened with some exquisite pearl-embroidered lace and bordered on the skirt with dark-hued skunk, threw up into relief the darkly-bronze lights in her hair

and made the big brown eyes seem softer and deeper than ever. A strange Oriental-looking headpiece studded with topazes and pearls accentuated the foreign note in her appearance, which so impressed strangers that they refused to believe that she was entirely English as she averred and believed. They said the way she moved and wore her dresses was not English, that she could not belong to the nation of women who know how to choose a frock but not how to wear it. As she stood in front of the mirror she was a flat contradiction to the American who said that English men were dressed, but the women only wore frocks.

Her looks had improved since her marriage. For some unknown reason she scrutinized herself dispassionately that night, and she realized that she was infinitely more attractive to men than when Gilbert had married her. Her figure now was almost as good as her mother's had been at her age. Indeed, the tops of her arms and her wrists were even prettier. She remembered what an old friend of her mother's had once said to her just before her marriage. "You will be much admired, my dear, and you will remain naturally good-looking longer than your mother has done. But you will never enslave all sorts and conditions of men as she did—not that you come so far below her in looks, but because hers is the *beauté du diable*, that irresistible magnet to unregenerate man. You look too intelligent, too independent, too critical. That will pique some here and there, but the woman who shows obviously that she likes men and that they are necessary to her always finds a return for that compliment. Besides, she holds out hopes of reward which your type does not. The majority of men are childish and lazy: they pick the fruit on the lowest branches. You would be too *exigeante*, you would demand more than they could give. Your nature is not that of a Circe, and men will know it instinctively."

Then she had kissed her affectionately and added, "I am glad you have no *beauté du diable*. The world is better without it. Take your place in the heart of one man, not in the passions of many."

Claudia thought over these words as she thoughtfully pulled on her gloves. And simultaneously she recalled a scene soon after Gilbert's proposal when she had, as to-night, stood in front of the mirror and slowly divesting herself of her garments, half shyly, half exultingly, because of her love of beauty, had watched the charms of her body emerge. She had rejoiced in her own comeliness because it was a gift she was bringing to her husband, a wedding gift such as few women could present.

She shrugged her shoulders at the recollection, and her face hardened a little. She had learned how evanescent a thing is passion with a man of Gilbert's self-centred, violent nature. And the knowledge rankled, so that as she looked at herself something which was not the individual, Claudia Currey, the wife of the new K.C., but Women Unsatisfied and Disappointed, crept into her eyes and mouth, and which, for the first time, gave her some fleeting resemblance to her mother. Was her mother's old friend quite right? Was there no touch of the devil's beauty in her looks now? Perhaps she would have changed her mind if she could have seen the woman looking broodingly at her own reflection, a smouldering defiance in her eyes, an unformed challenge on her lips. That it was not the real Claudia that looked so, the passionate-hearted, idealistic woman who walked away with her head held high, the elder woman would have known; but she would have had to acknowledge regretfully that Claudia was evolving.

Then had she been present she would have seen the little hardness disappear as morning mist before the sun, as a familiar padding sound became evident along the carpet.

Only Billie, only a dog, but so unchangeably devoted, so unceasingly responsive. In a sudden burst of thwarted affection she caught him up, heedless of her costly embroidery, and hugged his fat bundle of soft brown fur. At least this creature loved her, she was his whole world and——

“Mr. Hamilton, madam.”

Billie found himself gently deposited on the floor, where he stood wagging his tail with pleasure at the caress, yet eyeing her beseechingly, as he always did when she was going out, as if to say, “Are you really going to leave me again?”

“Tell Mr. Hamilton that I am quite ready. Is the fur rug in the motor? It will be cold coming home to-night.”

She refastened a corsage spray that had been loosened, and picked up an Eastern-looking garment of dull golds and browns, with a chiffon and skunk muff that matched. Outside it was freezing, and the trees in the Park were lightly powdered with snow. Billie stood on his short stumpy hind legs—a great effort by reason of his plumpness—and besought her to stay with him. Claudia laughed gently, and stooping down, took the little useless, dangling paws in her hand.

“Billie, you fool, don’t you know how ridiculous it is to love anyone so much? Better far to cut your heart up into lots of little pieces and distribute them than give it away in a lump. Don’t you know that?”

No, Billie didn’t know that at all.

“Well, it is. Listen to my words of wisdom and ponder them in your doggy understanding. It hurts, Billie boy, to love very much, it hurts dreadfully, though you pretend, except to a little dog who keeps your counsel, that it doesn’t. Well, I shall never do it again, and it’s all over, Billie; it’s all over, both the dream and the awakening.... Go to your basket and sleep the sleep of the faithful.”

They drove some way in silence. Inside the motor it was cosy and warm, in pleasant contrast to the streets, for the snow that lingered still on the trees had turned into slush on the pavements. The pedestrians looked uncomfortable and nipped by the east wind which was blowing, and the mud on the roads gleamed evilly in the light of the street lamps. Here and there they passed dirty heaps of snow in sheltered corners. Like the lace petticoats of a fine lady once pure and spotless, it was revolting now in its soiled, bedraggled state. People waiting in the wind at street corners for buses looked enviously at the motor as they passed. The padded luxury in which the two were enveloped, the dim frosted light, the narcissi in the silver holder diffusing a faint perfume, were very *intime* and aloof from the discomfort abroad.

They had left Baker Street behind them before Claudia came out of her reverie and realized that she was not being sociable. She looked sideways at her companion, to find him steadily regarding her.

"Are you wondering when I would be polite and talk?" she said, with a smile.

"No.... I was making a mental picture of you. I think—I think I can paint you now. I want to paint you in that velvet cloak—what colour do you call it?—it is like copper in the firelight—with the sable just touching your throat at one side just as it is now and falling off the other shoulder. Will you let me? Oh! I want my brushes in my hand now." His eyes suddenly blazed with the inspiration of the moment as they devoured her. Quickly she drew the folds of the cloak closer around her neck. She felt as though a scorching wind had swept over her, a sirocco of passion came from him to her. She shrank back a little, yet even as she instinctively did so she wondered why. Her husband flagrantly neglected her, most of her friends had consoled them-

selves for their husbands' shortcomings, and had not she *almost* determined to seek the love which she craved outside her home? She met his eyes, and she was half attracted, half repelled by their light. She liked him, she felt his magnetism drawing her, and yet something which she could not quite understand bobbed quickly up to the surface of her mind and surveyed them both with a certain contempt. So she was a little cruel in her reply to his enthusiasm.

"You were not very successful last time. I hope you destroyed that picture."

"Yes, I slashed it to pieces in the middle of the night," he said sombrely.

Claudia laughed lightly.

"Why in the middle of the night? Why were you moved to be so melodramatic?" She often teased him and made him angry by saying that he ought to have been an actor. For Frank Hamilton had a torch of the woman in him which clothed in drama many things that he did and said. Whether he was conscious of these effects or whether they came naturally to his character Claudia could never determine.

"I had been dreaming of you," he said simply. "I had seen you standing at the foot of my bed, looking down on me, and I knew exactly how I should have painted you. So I sprang out of bed and hacked the beastly canvas to pieces. Afterwards I made a rough charcoal sketch of you from memory. To-night you look as you did when you stood at the foot of my bed." The eyes of the man were audacious, but the words were spoken very quietly.

"I beg to remark that my frock is brand new," rejoined Claudia flippantly. "I have never worn it even in dream-land. It is hard to be deprived of a positively first appearance when frocks are so ruinously expensive."

"You looked wonderful that night," he went on

dreamily. "I have always seen you since—as you might look."

"As I *might* look," she repeated, her curiosity getting the better of her discretion. "What do you mean by that?"

He was looking out at the glistening streets, at the flakes of snow beginning to fall again, and he made no reply. This piqued her the more, and she repeated her question.

"I suppose you will be angry with me," he said slowly. "Women always resent these things. I don't know why. . . . As you *might* look if you were not so proud and if your brain did not rule your heart, if you would let yourself be the woman—you were meant to be."

Claudia wanted to say "How ridiculous!" but she couldn't. The motor was passing a large burial ground, the tombstones showing by the railings like dreary grey ghosts in the darkness, shut in with the wet, dripping trees, and looking hungrily at life passing a few yards away. Underneath those tombstones were hearts and brains in silent decay that had once been men and women. Claudia watched them flit by and she was silent now. She wondered if those tombstones had a message for her. Were not the dead saying "Live! live! live! Death started out to meet as soon as you were born."

The man beside her commenced to quote softly, almost in a whisper:

"Always I know how little severs me
From mine heart's country, that is yet so far;
And I must lean and long across a bar
That half a word would shatter utterly.

"Ah! might it be, that just by touch of hand
Or speaking silence, shall the barrier fall;
And she shall pass, with no vain words at all,
But droop into mine arms and understand."

The motor came to a standstill, and Claudia shook herself free from the spell of his words. There are few men who can quote poetry without divesting it of all lyrical charm and naturalness, but Frank Hamilton knew or had acquired the art. Then, as though the quotation were some nursery jingle, his voice altered, and he said, "Heigh ho! is this the house? What is my hostess like? Hints, please. I meant to have asked you before."

"Much younger than her husband, but not as young as she would like to be," whispered Claudia hurriedly. "If you flatter her judiciously you may get a portrait out of her. She is dying to have it painted."

The boy was opening the door, but he caught her arm with every appearance of sudden anger, and made her stop and look at him.

"Do you think I only like to come out with you because I may get commissions for portraits from your friends?" he said heatedly. "Answer me, please."

Claudia looked at the boy and motioned him to silence. "Don't be foolish, I was only jesting. You musn't be so sensitive...." Then, as they walked up the steps together she said smilingly, "If you say silly things like that, you shan't come out with me again. But, seriously, Mrs. Rivington has been wanting to meet you for a long time. I think she fancies that if she gets to know you the portrait will come cheaper. But she is well able to pay, so don't take any notice when she hints at her poverty of purse. She is a woman who would try and get a discount off her seat in heaven."

"You *will* make time to come to the studio one day quite soon, won't you?" he pleaded.

"I'll see," she said, as the door opened before them.

The maid came forward and slipped off her cloak. As she waited and pulled up her gloves, Claudia propounded a question to herself.

“He seems to care so much—I wonder if he is really sincere.”

When a woman stands and asks that question, the man has scored his first point. But Claudia thought the tricks were still all in her hand.

CHAPTER III

"ICH LIEBE DICH"

TO her surprise Claudia found that the assembled company included her father and mother-in-law. Mrs. Rivington's set was absolutely antipodal to Lady Currey's, but as the General was an old friend of Sir John's Lady Currey occasionally and stiffly countenanced the wife. Since her marriage, the intercourse between Claudia and Gilbert's family had been of the most formal description, for Lady Currey found nothing to like in Claudia, and her daughter-in-law realized that she was taken on sufferance.

"So I shall not see my dear son to-night," said the elder woman, as she presented a frosty cheek for Claudia to kiss. "It is a disappointment." She looked with sideways disapproval at Claudia's toilette. "As showy as her mother," was her mental comment.

"You knew he was expected? He telephoned me at the last minute that he was detained at his chambers."

Lady Currey's eyebrows were of the fixture kind that cannot really be raised, only crumpled. She crumpled them now.

"Ah! I remember when I was young no woman thought of going out without her husband. If John did not care to go to a function I stayed away. When he

had that fall from his horse I never took a meal outside the house for five months."

Claudia would have explained to anyone else that her hostess had insisted on her presence, and thus have soothed down old-fashioned prejudices, but Lady Currey's tone annoyed her.

"Oh!" she said carelessly, "women are neither treated as children nor inmates of a harem nowadays. We have progressed, you know. Women are freeing themselves. Did you never revolt in your heart of hearts?"

"My pleasure was always to do as my husband wished."

"What is that about me?" said Sir John, coming up to them. "How do you do, Claudia. I am sorry Gilbert is not able to come. But it shows the right spirit. I inculcated that into him when he was a boy."

He looked at Claudia fixedly under his heavy, bushy eyebrows. They always annoyed Claudia, who longed to tell him to brush them. She knew the meaning of that look. It was to remind her that she had so far failed to provide him with a grandson.

"Then the responsibility rests with you," said Claudia quietly.

"What do you mean? What responsibility? We are proud of him."

"'All work and no play——'" Claudia began to quote, when he interrupted her.

"Pooh! that was invented by some lazy rogue, I bet. Work never yet hurt any man. It's play—late hours, too rich food and too much drink—that plays old Harry with the constitution. I impressed that on him early in life. Marian, don't fidget with your fan"—she carried an old-fashioned fan of black ostrich feathers—"it worries me. The husband to work and the wife to look after the house and the children, that is the proper division. You leave Gilbert alone, and don't worry him to come to silly dinner-parties. I'm getting on in years, and

it doesn't matter about me. He's carrying the name to the country. The youngest K.C.—it's a thing to be proud of in a husband, Claudia." He fixed his rather prominent cold grey eyes on her as she lightly shrugged her shoulders.

But her hostess fluttered up to her rescue. Mrs. Rivington never walked like other people, she always floated or fluttered.

"Mrs. Currey, may I present to you Mr. Littleton, who will take you in to dinner. It was too bad of your husband to desert us. But he is impervious to the charms of women, isn't he?"

"Obviously not," said the tall, almost gaunt, fair-haired man who bowed before her. Claudia knew by the accent that he was an American. "Your husband is the new K. C., is he not? King's Counsel—it has a dignified but archaic sound to our ears."

"Don't," cried Mrs. Rivington shrilly, gauging in ten seconds the probable cost of Claudia's dress. "I'm an Imperialist, and I wave flags and put up bunting and do all sorts of loyal things, and the red on a Union Jack doesn't agree with my complexion, so I really am quite genuine and what-you-may-call-it. Don't run down the King to me." She fluttered off, her eyes roving restlessly over the couples she was pairing.

Left together, Claudia and the American smiled. He was the type of American that suggests the mettlesome racehorse, lean-flanked, long-limbed, not a spare ounce of flesh on his bones, relying on training and determination to carry him through the race. He was unusually fair, with a suggestion that he might have had a Viking ancestor, yet there was nothing colourless about him. Claudia wondered what he might be, millionaire, financier, hoping to become one, railroad magnate, what? She was sure he was a worker, it was written in every line of him.

"I am certain women like our hostess are really and

truly the props of your empire," he said gravely. "The sacrifice of a complexion, what can compare with it? Sons, lands, money—what can touch it?"

They both laughed as they moved in to dinner. As Claudia had predicted, Mrs. Rivington was spreading herself over Frank Hamilton. Littleton caught the exchange of glances between him and his partner, and made a mental note. He was by way of studying Englishwomen.

"Are you here for long?" asked Claudia, unfolding her serviette.

"Maybe I'll be here for six months or so. I know you are wondering what is my particular branch of money-making. I'm a publisher—Littleton, Robins and Co., and we're starting a branch over here as an experiment. I want to stay for a bit and direct it."

Her interest was aroused. Everything to do with books had a fascination for her ever since Colin Paton had taught her to love them. And to her a publisher was not a merchant, a mere purveyor of books to the public, but something dedicated to the service of art. The glamour of the books was around the man who produced them. She knew of his firm as one that specialized in art books and good *belles lettres*. She had several books with his imprint on her shelves. So the talk flowed on smoothly after this happy opening, neither having to consider what they should say next to while away the dinner-hour. Claudia found herself more interested than she had been for a long time at a dinner-table. He had not the delicate illuminating touch of Colin Paton, he lacked the subtleties of his imagination and sound classical scholarship, but he knew all the books of the day and was appreciative of the good in them.

Towards the end of dinner he looked at her with a whimsical twinkle in his blue eyes and said, "I wonder if you will be amused or annoyed if I tell you something. I am not sure how an Englishwoman takes such things.

Personally I think the photograph of a beautiful woman should be public property, but I realize she may not."

Claudia turned a wondering face upon him.

"Your photograph, in the shape of a coloured book-cover, has gone into every part of the United States, although"—with an appraisingly admiring glance—"the artist did not get your colouring correctly. He made your hair dead black and your skin and colouring too pink and commonplace."

"But how——"

"It was like this. We were publishing a new book of Henry Roxton Vanderling's—you know him—and we wanted an attractive paper cover with a portrait of the heroine. I remember it was a very hot day when we were discussing the matter, and I told the artist I wanted something specially taking. I generally have the English illustrated papers sent out to me, and he was listlessly turning over the pages, when he struck your photograph. With a cry of 'Here it is—bully!' he nabbed it. A few days later he brought me a coloured sketch suggested by your portrait. I have the original sketch framed in my office. Are you offended?"

Claudia laughed. It struck her as being humorous and something unusual in the way of introductions. And she was pleasantly aware, as any woman would be, of the compliment conveyed.

"I knew you the minute you came into the room, although I had forgotten your name. When you came in I said to myself, 'Vanderling's "Woman of the East!"' I felt somehow we were already acquainted."

"Well, I think I ought to have a copy of the book," said Claudia promptly.

"Sure. I'll send you one to-morrow. I'm delighted you are amused, not angry. I took a big chance in telling you, but I had too."

"You thought I'd find out and you'd better put the thing nicely, with the varnished side uppermost?"

He gave a hearty laugh. "Well, you've guessed most of the truth. Mrs. Rivington spotted the resemblance, and as I come from the same country as George Washington, I didn't tell a lie."

"No, it's no good telling a lie when it is sure to be found out. Only a good lie justifies the liar."

Mrs. Rivington was collecting eyes by this time, and Claudia rose. In the drawing-room, an apartment so crowded with furniture and bric-à-brac of various periods that it suggested a well-dusted shop in Wardour Street, her hostess seized on her.

"I was glad to see you getting on so well with Mr. Littleton. He wanted to meet you. He told you about the 'Woman of the East'? Quite romantic, I think. He ought to fall in love with you."

"To serve as an advertisement is hardly romantic, surely? I rank with the monkey advertising soap and a starved cat extolling a certain milk."

"Oh! how funny you are—and so cold and critical! Now I should be thrilled. But you're not a bit romantic, anyone can see that. Oh! Claudia, is it true about your brother?"

"My brother? What is it?" She wished Mrs. Rivington's eyes would not wander so restlessly over her person.

"Why don't you know? They say he has married 'The Girlie Girl!'"

"Who on earth is 'The Girlie Girl'?" laughed Claudia, sipping her liqueur. "It sounds like a cross between a barrel organ and a seaside pier."

"Yes, doesn't it? But don't you know her—haven't you seen her picture on the boardings? She was playing at the Pavilion last week. I don't like her style myself, but I suppose most men would think her pretty. Not, of course, that you can tell. Paint goes such a long way, doesn't it?"

"A music-hall artiste? What an absurd rumour!"

"Are you sure it's a rumour?" said her hostess, with a gleam of malice. "These girls are always entrapping rich young men, and I heard as a positive fact that the wedding took place at the registrar's three weeks ago."

"Nonsense. Jack amuses himself, but he wouldn't do a thing like that. He's an awful fool, but not such a fool as that."

"Well," replied Mrs. Rivington, dabbing at her nose with a powder-puff; "I hope it's not true, for your sake. Fancy having a sister who calls herself 'The Girlie Girl'! Too awful to contemplate, isn't it? Thank goodness, I haven't any children. I shouldn't survive such a thing. I don't believe in marrying out of your own class." As the General had obviously married beneath him—it was rumoured that she had been employed as reception-clerk at an hotel—her scruples were understandable. "She figures on the hoardings in a sort of *vivandière* costume, and the men seem to admire her no end. But men always do admire such creatures. But really, Claudia, I am afraid it is true. My sewing-maid knows one of her maids, and this girl told Bertha in confidence that she went to the registrar's with them, only nobody is to know at present. She heard all about the wedding-breakfast and the gallons of champagne and the flowers. These people *live* on champagne, I believe."

Claudia, though a little startled, hardly credited the story. At one time she had been afraid that Jack would make some horrible *mésalliance*, but as the years had gone on and he had left the impressionable, callow stage behind him, she had ceased to feel any alarm. Jack was an ass, but he was a conventional ass. Once she hinted her fears to him, but he had taken the suggestion as such a deadly insult that she believed he realized the foolishness of such things. She remembered that he had proudly informed her that in the circle of "little ladies" he was nicknamed "The Knowing Kard," and he gave her to understand that the nickname was not undeserved. Every

now and then the family asked him when he was going to settle down and espouse some well-born, inexperienced girl, but Jack invariably said airily that there was lots of time, and that a really nice wife would hamper a fellow horribly, and a third party was always such a nuisance. It was exceedingly unlikely that there was any foundation for Mrs. Rivington's piece of gossip. Claudia dismissed the idea with a laugh.

"Jack has a large heart, if somewhat shallow," she said lightly. "I don't think I'll worry about his wedding-present."

"Strange fascination these creatures have for men," commented her hostess, glancing round to see that the other women were occupied. "Never can understand it myself. How a man can fall in love with powder—several inches thick—and grease paint beats me. But men are so easily taken in, aren't they? and of course we should be too proud to use their arts."

Claudia's attention was wandering and her eyes were caught by a woman of about thirty-five, rather badly dressed, who did not seem to belong to the same *galère* as the other women. She was sitting apart, looking shy and a little uncomfortable. No one seemed to be paying any attention to her. Claudia wondered who she could be. She had fine, expressive eyes and a sensitive mouth, and she could have been much better-looking had she been more fashionably dressed. Mrs. Rivington noticed the direction of her eyes.

"I do wish Mrs. Milton would look smarter," she said rather irritably. "I hate réchaufféd dresses, don't you? But she's got a beautiful voice, and I thought she would amuse us after dinner. She and her husband are as poor as church mice. She can't get any engagements. Partly her dowdy dresses, I should think."

"Do you mean you have engaged her for the evening?" asked Claudia.

"Heavens, no! I give her a dinner in return for some

music. She wants to get known. It's really doing her a kindness. I must go and talk to your mother-in-law now. She hates me, but I can see everyone else is tired of her. Where are you going?"

"I am going to talk to Mrs. Milton." Claudia could not stand the sight of the solitary figure any longer, and she longed to tell her hostess what she thought of the practice of getting artistes to give their services for nothing. Colin Paton had opened her eyes to the injustice. She was filled with shame for the set which she represented, and she gave Mrs. Milton her most cordial smile—it could be very charming—as she sat down beside her.

"Mrs. Rivington tells me that you sing beautifully," she said. I am looking forward to hearing you. One so seldom hears music nowadays after dinner. It is usually that tiresome bridge."

The woman flushed with pleasure; she had a fine skin that coloured easily. They were the first friendly words that had been addressed to her that evening, for she had been taken in to dinner by a deaf old major.

"How nice of you," she said involuntarily. She had been admiring Claudia all the evening. "I do hope I am in good voice, but my little boy has an attack of bronchitis and I was up with him most of the night. And when you are a little tired——"

Claudia nodded sympathetically. "I know. It takes all the fullness and timbre out of the voice, doesn't it? Must you nurse your little boy yourself?" She noticed that the singer's voice was infinitely more refined than that of her hostess, which had an unmistakable Cockney twang.

"Yes, we can't afford a nurse," said Mrs. Milton simply. "You see, my husband lost all his money two years ago. That's why I come out to sing. When we were married I gave it up to please him, but now I want to help keep the house going." The kind and real interest in Claudia's eyes warmed her to unwonted loquacity.

"And you have a little boy?"

"I have three children, two boys and a girl. They are such darlings." Her eyes lit up and the whole face was transformed to something almost beautiful in its brooding motherliness. "The boys are just like my husband, so plucky and good-tempered. Oh! they are worth fighting for. We say that every night when we tip-toe into their room and see they are all right for the night. Children make all the difference, don't they?"

"I—I suppose they do." Claudia could visualize the picture of the man and woman, tired and anxious, looking with love and hope at their sleeping children and feeling that they made all the difference. She looked across at the chattering groups scattered about the room, most of the women, like her hostess, childless or having only one child. Scraps of their conversation punctuated Mrs. Milton's words. "I assure you, Kitty, she lost eighty pounds in two rubbers, and everyone knows she can't afford it. Who pays her debts? I should like to know, and...." "Her bill, my dear, was outrageous. She charged me twenty-two guineas for that little muslin frock, and then...." "—entirely new method of treating the complexion. No creams, only massage with...."

"You have none yet?" said Mrs. Milton gently.

"No....but a husband counts also, doesn't he?"

"Oh, yes! Rob is the best husband in the world. Perhaps I love the boys so much because they are like him. He hates my having to sing again. You know how a man feels when his wife has to work, and he hoped to give me an easy time. But he's working in the City all day, and I'd like to do something too. Oh, yes! Rob is splendid. I should think he *did* count." A woman's voice broke in shrilly: "I simply adore my dogs. Wouldn't be parted from them. Don't enjoy my meals unless they are with me and...."

Claudia and Mrs. Milton looked at one another, and the mother-woman smiled. "Isn't it a pity?" she said.

"Tell me where you live," responded Claudia. "I shall

want someone to sing at a little dinner I am giving soon. I will not encourage these dull bridge evenings. Will you sing for me?.... Ah! here come the men."

Frank Hamilton came straight across to her and commenced to talk, apparently not noticing her companion, who drew a little away, as though feeling she was not wanted any longer. But Claudia interrupted Hamilton's rather ardent words and said, "Mrs. Milton, was Mr. Hamilton introduced to you?" He was forced to turn a little, and Claudia noticed that Mrs. Milton bowed with a little embarrassment.

"I think Mr. Hamilton has forgotten me," she replied quietly. "We were acquainted in our youth."

"Were you?" Claudia looked at him in surprise, for she had been watching him all the evening out of the corner of her eyes, while apparently oblivious of his existence—a womanish trick—and she had not seen him speak to her. When Hamilton spoke it was rather stiffly.

"I did not see you before, Mrs. Milton." It was a stupid fib, and Claudia noted it. "How do you do? Yes, in our salad days we used to warble duets together, didn't we?" The geniality of the last words was rather forced. Claudia divined that he did not want those days recalled. The obvious reason momentarily occurred to her, but a glance at Mrs. Milton dissipated it. Also, she was several years older than Hamilton. Hamilton had once confessed that he could never fall in love with a plain woman, and Margaret Milton would never be beautiful except to the man who loved her.

"I had hoped I should sit next to you," he said in an undertone. Mrs. Milton had moved away to the piano. "It was too bad, and I couldn't even see you properly because of that beastly erection in the middle."

"Oh! you were quite happy. You seemed to get on quite well with your hostess. Who was that dark-complexioned lady next to you, with some truly wonderful diamonds?"

"Mrs. Jacobs, the wife of a South African millionaire. She told me that herself and that she was a widow!"

"Ha! ha! Do we want to sit for a dusky portrait?"

"Don't. . . ." He tried to look very hurt, but it was not so successful as earlier in the evening. The dinner had been quite good and the champagne better. Hamilton's eyes were a little too bright to look very grieved.

"Did she not give you a commission?"

"Well, what if she did? Why do you always sneer at me. And it's *your* portrait I want to paint. What do I care for her commission, even if it is a lucrative one. Parchment and diamonds—ugh! Tell me, when will you come again to the studio?"

"Hush, Mrs. Milton is going to sing. You must remain absolutely quiet."

The first notes of Brahms' "*Sapphische Ode*" throbbed through the inharmonious room. Margaret Milton had the deep, pure contralto that makes the listener think of all things tender and true and intimate, the things that no man or woman says, even to his twin soul, but sometimes in the watches of the night whispers to the shadows. And the shadows enfold them and carry them away into the Hinterland beyond the setting of the sun, with the poignant tears and the imperishable kisses, the pain and the joy and the passion of mortals.

The timbre of the voice was singularly sympathetic and emotional, and Claudia instantly fell under its enchantment. Somehow she felt that the woman was singing to *her*, guiding her, pleading with her. She sang several times, and then, after "*Still wie die Nacht*" by Claudia's request, she began to sing a song that always made Claudia's heart throb and ache intolerably. Her throat swelled and burned on this night, and the tears waited on her eyelids. She forgot the indifferent, politely bored company, as she listened to the exquisite strains of that wonderful love-song, "*Ich liebe dich.*"

And this plain, dowdy woman knew the real meaning

of that song. Only a woman who knew the joy and the pain of love could have sung it as she sang it. The cry of love rang through the room like a clear clarion call. Even the people who had wanted to play bridge felt it and looked vaguely uncomfortable. For a moment they were lured from their money-bags. The call was so clear that it penetrated the cotton-wool of everyday life.

Claudia found herself looking at the shabby woman at the piano with fierce envy. Once, she, Claudia, had thought she *knew*, once her heart had triumphantly chanted "*Ich liebe dich, ich liebe dich*," like an eternal refrain. Once? Was it all quite over? Something stirred within her, something touched her cold heart like the rosy finger of hope. Once! Perhaps she and Gilbert had only drifted apart, perhaps she had not made due allowances for the inarticulate, more prosaic, unemotional nature of man. She had loved him very much—she did love him still, if only——

There was a bowl of red roses at her elbow. She did not notice them, but perhaps it was their perfume that mounted to her brain and brought back the remembrance just then of the garden at Wargrave, when she had questioned Gilbert and asked him if he had really loved her.... He had promised she should always come first....she was right to demand that....he had said that he was not good at pretty speeches and that she must take some things for granted.... that men were different from women.... Her blood tingled in her veins as she felt in imagination again the fierce pressure of his arms around her, his kisses on her lips. Surely he had really loved her then, she reiterated to herself. She knew more now than she did then. She had been initiated into the mysteries of life and death. She had begun to realize how large a part mere animal passion plays in a man's life, how men take love (so called) where they find it, how "the worldly hopes men set their hearts upon" cheat women of their just dues, and leave them bankrupt. But

with the passionate echo of "*Ich liebe dich*" in her ears, she felt she could not write that horrible word "finis" to this page of her life. Perhaps she had been too *exigente*, impatient; perhaps she could be more tactful now. Eighteen months! Why, it must be that she had not had time to master the game of love. Their tastes were so different, perhaps that was partly the trouble. She remembered how he had talked her out of going to the enchanted Palace at Como and substituted a golfing honeymoon in Scotland. But he had been very charming to her—humoring all her fancies, his own having been satisfied—he had made her feel that she had only to command and he would always obey love's call. It had been an intoxication. Was it all behind her? Was love behind her for the rest of her life? No, she could not do without love. She had always wanted it, she had tasted its sweets, no, no, no! Gilbert must love her again as he used to. He could not have entirely changed in eighteen months. He was at home probably. Perhaps he was thinking of her, wanting her to come in——

She rose abruptly to her feet, filled with an uncontrollable blind desire for action, to pursue this elusive thing which seemed to have escaped from her hands.

But Hamilton's eyes fixed on her in surprise at her abrupt rising, drew her back to earth and the faded Aubusson carpet on which she stood. He, too, had been moved by the music. His artistic pulses, so easily set beating, had responded to the call also. But his thoughts had been of the rather capricious woman by his side, the woman who so far had never listened to his words of love.

After his first surprise at her action, he came to the flattering conclusion that the music had warmed her heart towards him. An easy favourite with women, he did not doubt that she cared for him. He had always gained what he wanted, though he had never before aimed at such big game as Claudia Currey. But he was rapidly

becoming famous, he was sought after and flattered. Women begged him to paint them on his own terms. He was not what he had been. Mrs. Milton knew what he had been. Perhaps the game was not so difficult as he had begun to fear. He looked at her meaningly, with a rising sense of power, but she did not return his glance. That might be shyness.

He heard her make her adieux to their hostess, who protested at her going so early.

"It is only eleven o'clock.... I suppose you are going on somewhere else, you and"—markedly—"Mr. Hamilton."

But her mother-in-law came to her rescue. "Claudia is quite right. I daresay Gilbert wants her. I know John is always fidgety when I am away from him."

Claudia did not laugh as she would have done half an hour previously. Perhaps Gilbert *was* wanting her. She wanted him to want her.

"Mr. Hamilton, you need not see me home. I can——"

"Of course I am coming. Good-bye, Mrs. Rivington, it has been a delightful evening. Yes, I won't forget about the portrait, Mrs. Jacobs."

He followed Claudia out into the hall, followed by Mrs. Milton with her roll of music.

"Don't you know I should come?" he whispered, not noticing her.

The maid helped Claudia on with her cloak. Mrs. Milton was tucking herself—the maid, with the strange knowledge of the servants' hall, did not trouble to help her—into a businesslike garment, long and warm. Claudia heard her make some inquiry of one of the maids, and caught the words "last 'bus."

Frank came up to her at that moment, the dawning light of possession in his eyes, a subtle change in his manner.

"Are you ready, madam?" He smiled to himself as he foresaw the long drive in the darkness, side by side in

the pleasant intimate warmth of the motor.... her hand would fall naturally into his and then....

"Mrs. Milton, can I not give you a lift in the motor?" Her clear voice cut short his dreams. "Where do you live? Maida Vale. Oh! we can go that way quite easily. Yes, I should like to take you home quickly to the bronchitis child."

Only one of the maids, who giggled over it and mimicked him directly the hall-door was shut, saw the sudden scowl on Hamilton's brow, for Claudia was bent on saving the tired woman an uncomfortable cold journey in the 'bus and Mrs. Milton was full of gratitude at the unexpected thoughtfulness.

"My! wasn't that a sell for him," said the pert parlour-maid. "Thought he'd have a nice, cosy time with her all alone. But she wasn't taking any. Always does a man good to take him down a peg or two!"

CHAPTER IV

"NOT SATISFIED"

AS Claudia was waiting for the lift in their block of flats half an hour later Fritz Neeburg came running down the stairs.

"Ah! Mrs. Currey, you're back early from your dinner-party." Claudia was a little impatient of Fritz Neeburg because of a certain German stolidity and lack of imagination, but he was what she called "a learned beast," and a very loyal and kindly friend to both of them. He had lately given up practising as a medical man and devoted himself to research work in connection with nervous troubles affecting the brain.

"Dinner-parties have such a family resemblance, haven't they? I was bored."

He nodded, noting the brilliancy of her eyes and wondering what had caused the excitement in their depths. She looked more highly strung than usual to-night, but it seemed a happy excitement. It might have been the anticipative joy of a woman going to her lover.

"Gilbert and I had some dinner—rather late—and we've been yarnning ever since."

Claudia raised her eyebrows. "I thought Gilbert was detained at his chambers."

Neeburg caught a glint in her eyes that made him apprehensive that he had said the wrong thing. "Oh!" he added hastily, "it was nearly nine before he rang me up. As it happened I was also late and hadn't fed."

Claudia's lips curved into a smile, a smile that puzzled

him. It *was* a smile, the lips had even parted, showing her rather small white teeth, but he felt that it was the wrong kind of smile. It seemed to have an edge to it somehow. He wondered if he had put his foot in it as he watched her ascend in the lift. Gilbert had told him that he had "got out of a stupid dinner-party....a woman likes those sort of things....her province, you know...." Fritz Neeburg was a bachelor and knew little of women, either by experience or temperament, but he realized that it was not a real smile of genuine amusement. He felt vaguely that it was like the early bloom of a peach which masks the hidden acidity. Then he recalled that Claudia lately had not been half so gay and spontaneously happy as in the early months of her marriage.

Gilbert came out of the study at the sound of her entrance. She saw at once that he was in a good temper and unusually genial. He was in the humor to stay up a little longer and chat, for he had just worsted Fritz in an argument over the Home Rule Bill, and Gilbert always liked to hold him own, even on his own hearthrug.

"Hallo, Claudia! you're back then. There's a nice fire in here. Pretty cold outside, isn't it?"

She followed him into the library without any reply, but he did not notice her silence, nor did he look at her, except casually. He was a man who would buy a beautiful picture, look admiringly at it once, hang it on his walls and then never notice it again.

A big leather chair invited her to sit down, but she stood by the oaken mantelpiece. Gilbert had commenced to put away several reference books that he had got out to convince Neeburg, for Gilbert was always great on figures and statistics.

"Tough fighter, old Fritz, but of course you can't expect a German, even if he has lived over here all his life, to understand English politics. Of course, he knows his own subjects and——"

"Gilbert, you and Neeburg dined together to-night."

"Yes," he said, faintly surprised. "Did you see him?" For the moment he had forgotten his broken engagement with the Rivingtons. He had a wonderful habit, which had helped to make him what he was, of settling a point and then automatically forgetting all about it. Then his wife's toilette caught his eye and he remembered. Where had Claudia been? Oh, yes! "It would have been an awful rush to have got back in time to dress and go out to Hampstead, and I didn't feel a bit like it. How is the old General?"

His back was towards her, busy with the bookcase. She looked at it coldly, critically.

"Couldn't you have made a little effort in order that I shouldn't have had to go all that way alone?" She herself made a great one to speak calmly and pleasantly. The echoes of *Ich liebe dich* were still faintly in her ears, and if he would only turn and take her in his arms, and say, "Look, old girl, I'm sorry. I know I'm a social shirker, but I forgot you would have to go alone," she was ready to return the pressure of his arms. Women can exist on very little love, very few caresses from the man they care for, and Claudia was in the mood to make every allowance for him.

He answered her rather mechanically, trying to find the correct place for the volume.

"Oh, well! you like dinner-parties, and it's not so far in the motor. It's not the day of the horse-brougham.... You are my social shop-window, and"—with blunt humour—"it's very nicely dressed. I wonder where that book of Burke's has got to? Besides I wanted to get hold of Fritz, I wanted his opinion on a case."

"You particularly asked me to accept this invitation as the General is an old friend of *your* family."

"Well, it does just as well if you go," he said imperturbably, mixing himself a whiskey and soda. "They understand how busy I am."

"Suppose—I don't understand." Her lips were compressed until the soft curves had disappeared, and the determination and independence of the chin were emphasized. He looked up from the syphon in surprise at her tone.

"Were they awfully annoyed at my not turning up? I suppose Mrs. Rivington scratched a little."

"I am not concerned with the Rivingtons. I am talking of myself, of my feelings on the subject." She was beginning to speak a little more quickly now. The cold, abstracted look in his eyes stung her. He could not even realize that she was hurt and angry. "I am not here merely as your social shop-window, as you call it. I am not here merely as your *hausfrau*, to order your food and entertain and visit your friends. That is the way in which you have lately been regarding me.... Do you realize how often I have to go out in the evening alone?"

"I'm sorry, but my work——"

"You could have got away quite easily to-night. I'm not a fool, Gilbert, don't underrate my intelligence. If you had said to me in the first place, 'Tell the Rivingtons we are engaged for that day,' and then spent the evening quietly at home with me, I should have been perfectly content. But I will not be used."

"My dear girl——"

Perhaps there is nothing an angry woman dislikes more at certain stages of an argument than that preface.

"Couldn't you even have come out to fetch me?" she went on. "You see hardly anything of me, and we might have had a good talk on the way home. Don't you want to see anything of me?"

"Why of course. Come, Claudia, do be reasonable. We are having a talk now, and it might be a pleasant one, if you are not so fiery. You are always getting so excited over things."

"I came home early because——" She remembered the impulse that had made her leave the company, and

she laughed. Love? Was love this cold, indifferent, methodical thing? Was she to be content with this tantalizing imitation? Her eyes flashed defiantly and she flung back her head. Picking up a cigarette out of the box, she sat down and lighted it. Her excitement had suddenly evaporated in that laugh like an exhaust-valve relieving steam pressure. It was the rather critical repressed woman of the world who next spoke to him.

"We don't see much of one another nowadays, do we?" she said, looking at him through the smoke.

"Later on I shall have more time, I hope, he replied, placidly accepting her cessation of unreasonableness. He never worried over women's moods. If you left them alone, he argued, they evaporated.

"Later on, we shall both be middle-aged," said Claudia calmly. "Later on the gods will jeer at us and ask us what we have done with our youth. They always ask that question sooner or later of everyone. They always bring you to account, and sometimes the balance is on one side and sometimes on the other. I wonder how you and I will be able to answer that question?"

"Oh! I'm not going to get old yet," he smiled. "Anyone would think we were on the verge of decrepitude."

"I am not sure you have ever been young." She leaned her chin on her hand and looked at him. Somehow the face of Frank Hamilton ranged itself beside it to-night. A weaker face, yes, but it seemed to her that there was real youth in the passionate eyes, real sentiment in his deep voice, a *joie de vivre* in his whole being which called to her like the gleam of snow to the Arctic explorer. Was it the strong men of the world who made women happy? Was not the strong man always self-centered, egoistic, taking all and giving nothing? Should a woman ask for too much strength in the man she loved?

Gilbert listened to her indulgently. It was just one of Claudia's odd moods. His marriage had been quite suc-

cessful, and therefore so had hers. He knew that she was very popular and that invitations to their house were eagerly coveted. After what his mother said, he would have hated that the marriage should have been a failure, and he had accepted as fuel to his pride his mother's remark after a dinner-party which they had given and at which Claudia had entertained the Prime Minister, the Lord Chief Justice and other well-known people. "Claudia makes an excellent hostess. After all, there is something to be said for your marriage. The Iversons have always had plenty of *savoir faire*." It was said a little grudgingly, for Lady Currey still did not like Claudia. There was nothing to disapprove of so far, but she was always waiting for something.

"I am not sure that you ever were young," repeated Claudia. "I don't believe you ever had a freakish, irresponsible mood. I remember Pat saying once, on a beautiful spring morning, that it made her feel as if she'd like to turn somersaults on the grass and yell like a wild Indian every time she came right side up! You never felt like that, did you?"

"But I'm neither a wild Indian nor a dog," said Gilbert, trying to stifle a yawn. He had felt stimulated while arguing with Neeburg, and had forgotten he was tired. Now the yawns were threatening to descend upon him and he began to feel drowsy. But a glance at Claudia showed him that she was wide awake. She had what her brother called "her brainy look."

He had resolutely tried to ignore Claudia's changing and complex moods from the very beginning of their married life. On their honeymoon he had stopped her speculations and questions with kisses. His treatment was clearly right. Claudia had been far less imaginative and introspective in her talk lately. This idea of trying to understand women was all nonsense. He had unconsciously shaped his treatment of women on some words of his father's *à propos* of some news he once brought

him about a neighbour's wife who had eloped with another man on the plea that her husband did not "understand her." "He's well rid of her," said his father contemptuously. "There's nothing to understand in women. Don't be misled by any of this modern novelist's jargon, my boy. Women always have suffered from the megrims, and they always will. In one century they are called the 'vapours,' in another 'moods,' but they are megrims all the same, caused by physical weakness and disabilities and lack of self-control. More harm has been done by humouring women and taking their megrims seriously than will ever be known. It's responsible for this 'Votes for Women' movement, and, mark my words, if women are not kept in their proper place, megrims may ruin the nation!"

"After all," said Gilbert, "it depends on what you mean by youth. I suppose the dictionary would define it as the state of being young, but it is conceivable that one might improve on that. I was once in the state of being young, you know, because my mother has some of my first teeth!"

Claudia pondered a minute, twisting an old French marquise ring round and round her little finger. "I should think," she said slowly, "it's the ability to notice and enjoy all the pleasures of the wayside. Yes, that's somewhere near it. The man who enjoys life is the one who saunters along, admiring the flowers in the hedges, sniffing the different perfumes, watching the insects and the birds, filling his lungs with the good fresh air. The man who doesn't know how to enjoy life is the one who rushes across country in the fastest touring car he can buy."

Gilbert rose and looked at the clock. "Lots of weeds and undesirable tramps by the wayside," he responded dryly.

"Weeds and tramps are part of life. To enjoy every minute of life you must waste a few."

"Well, I wish I had a chance to waste some.... Bed, Claudia. I am sure no one would ever think you missed your beauty-sleep, but I fear you often do." He turned towards the door, but she recalled him.

"Gilbert!"

"Yes?"

"Are we always going to live like this? This is the first opportunity we have had for a talk for—oh! weeks! When we have people here, you always fall into bed the moment the last guest goes; when we do go out together we just have a few minutes in the car on the way home. Gilbert, I——" Having got so far she hesitated and cast a quick, appealing look at him. He came a little nearer.

"Is there anything you particularly want to say to me?" he said, uncomprehending, but noticing the convulsive rise and fall of her white bosom under its laces and pearls. What had upset her?

"Gilbert, other men find me attractive....other men like my company....you realize that, don't you?" she said, with unexpected directness.

He raised his eyebrows, and then they met in a frown. He found her words in bad taste, which was not usual with Claudia.

"I quite appreciate that my wife is admired by other——"

"Yes, but I *am* your wife. Somehow—to-night—I feel I must speak plainly and tell you—that I am not satisfied with the crumbs that fall from the legislative table. Once, before we were married, I warned you that such scraps would not satisfy me. I want more. Any woman, unless she were as cold as a stone and had only married you for her own ends, would want more. Why, we are hardly friends even! Oh, I don't want to know the details of your work, but you never discuss anything with me. I am as lonely as I was before I married you.... I thought I was entering a land of plenty. You made me think so. I knew I should never be content

with a conventional marriage." She caught her breath for a moment. "Yes, I remember my very words to you—'Love is the only convention that I own.' Have you forgotten?.... If you value me and my love, think over what I have said and look where we have drifted, Gilbert. I daresay you haven't noticed—that is the worst part of it all—that we have drifted at all. Perhaps you think that we stand where we did eighteen months ago.... We none of us ever stand still even for a single day and there's a pretty strong current that catches restless, unsatisfied women nowadays. And—I am not satisfied, *I am not satisfied.*"

With a sudden abrupt movement, so foreign to her that it showed how much she had been keeping herself in leash, she went out and closed the door behind her.

He stood where she had left him, a look of annoyed surprise upon his face. It was a real shock to him, and a disagreeable one. He preferred to think that Claudia was quite satisfied with their marriage. She had never before complained of any specific thing. She did not now. He told himself irritably that he wished she would, it would make it so much easier to give her what she wanted. The worst of women was that they were so vague in their demands and their complaints. Men can usually put down in black and white what they want; women never. He loved her, she was his wife, she shared his honour and the brilliant prospects for the future. What more did she want? Why did women talk in such an exaggerated way nowadays? Surely it was her fault if she were not satisfied? He had never pretended to any Paolo or Romeo-like passion; he had given her instead a much more useful commodity in the twentieth century—the good, honest heart of a real man, instead of the mawkish sentiment of an unbusiness-like poet. He had never run after other women as did so many of the men he knew. Of course, Claudia might say he had not had the time to do so, which was true. But

probably he could have made some time if he had wanted to amuse himself. It was true that he had not wanted to make love to any woman. After he had indulged his natural passions in marrying Claudia, women had dropped into the background again. Even the desultory emotions which used to stir within him had not agitated him. He could have lived a virtuous bachelor life with the greatest of ease.

Claudia had dropped her gloves on the hearthrug and left a soft, cloudy chiffon scarf on the leathern armchair. With the sense of tidiness and order that characterized him, he picked them up.

Did women know what they wanted nowadays? Was it not the signs of the mental inflammation of the times?

Perhaps it was the scent from the scarf—Claudia used some delicate, haunting perfume—that caused an idea to strike him, a very mundane masculine idea, but still it had the grace of at least a faint touch of imagination. The perfume revived memories.... There was that night at Fyvie Castle on their honeymoon, when they had watched the moon shining on the loch from her window, he remembered the sweetness of her body nestling against him on the old window-seat....once he had awakened with that perfume in his nostrils and found her arms around his neck.... It had been playtime then, but women were only children masquerading as grown-ups. Had he found the key to her queer speech? Was that what she had meant? Yes, in that way he had been very neglectful the last few months and married women had a right.... He recalled that she had sometimes looked rather wistfully at him when he kissed her good-night outside her door.... Oh, yes! that was the trouble. How stupid of him!

He stopped to put away a few papers and then, ten minutes later, he knocked at the door which divided their rooms.

He waited, but there was no answer. He gently tried the handle. The door was locked.

He listened intently and he thought he heard a sound like a sob strangled in a pillow.

"Claudia, Claudia, may I come in?"

Now there was no sound at all.

"Claudia, I want to talk to you. Open the door."

But still no movement in the room or any sign that she had heard him, though he felt sure she must have done so.

Then, with a shrug of his shoulders and a compression of his lips that made him very like his father, he turned away.

Two minutes later he was fast asleep. His father was right, was his last reflection. There was no good trying to understand women.

CHAPTER V

THE GIRLIE GIRL

THE next morning, when Claudia opened her eyes after a bad and restless night, she knew by Johnson's voice that some agitation was in the air.

"Madam, I am sorry to wake you so early, but your mother has been ringing you up on the telephone. She insisted on my waking you."

For a moment Claudia's dark eyes, still heavy with sleep, stared at her vaguely. Then she sat up in bed with a look of alarm. "What time is it? Half-past eight, and mother wants to speak to me. Why, she is never wakened until ten! What can have happened?"

Something in Johnson's expression caught Claudia's eye and made her certain that she knew something.

"Johnson, is anything amiss? Is Pat ill or had an accident?" Pat was the sort of wild, careless person one always associates with possible accidents.

"No, madam, I—I should think it must be about Mr. Jack. It's all in the papers this morning. I thought you couldn't know anything about it."

"Jack's had an accident, then?" said Claudia, paling, for in her way she was fond of him. "Is it very bad—tell me quick, Johnson."

"Madam," gasped the woman, "it's not exactly an accident—I mean—oh! madam, let your mother tell you."

Suddenly Claudia remembered Mrs. Rivington's words of the previous evening. It was true, then. That could be the only thing which would give Jack prominence in the papers.

"All right, Johnson, don't look so frightened. I think I know. He's got married, hasn't he? All right, ring up my mother and put me through. And fetch me a newspaper, quick. Do that first, before you ring up. Do you understand?"

"It's here, madam; I thought perhaps——"

Claudia tore it open with shaking fingers, and Billie rubbed his head against her arm in vain. A few minutes ago she would have said, "What did it matter what a young fool like Jack did?" Now she realized that she was furiously angry, ridiculously angry. If he had married this awful woman—Ah!

PEER'S GRANDSON MARRIES A MUSIC-HALL ARTISTE.

The words stared hideously at her as they would stare at several thousand people who opened that page—friends, enemies, acquaintances. The blood sang in her ears as she tried to read the paragraph. She could hear their friends shouting with laughter, she could see the look of contempt on the faces of the people who mattered, she could hear the coarse chuckles, the resurrected stories Ugh! disgusting.

The newspaper, a popular halfpenny, recounted in well-worn journalistic phrases how The Girlie Girl of music-hall fame last night confessed that she had been married for several weeks to Captain Jack Iverson of the Blues, a

grandson of Lord Creagh and the son of the famous society beauty whose picture, "Circe," was known all over Europe. "The bridegroom," said the paper, "has for some years been considered one of the richest and best-looking young bachelors in Mayfair, and its doves will be fluttered by the news of his marriage. It appears that they were married before a registrar and the utmost secrecy was observed, but truth will out, and last night Miss Fay Morris, better known as The Girlie Girl, was the recipient of much congratulation. Our reporter visited her between the first and second houses and found her dressing-room crowded with flowers. She is very popular in the profession, and has made her successes in America, South Africa and at home. She is very pretty, with a *petite*, perfect figure, and she possesses a considerable store of vitality and go, so much that she is billed as 'The whirlwind dancer and mimic.' Captain Iverson's sister is the wife of the new K.C., Gilbert Currey, and is considered one of the most fascinating hostesses in Society."

Johnson hardly recognized her as she looked up from the paper. It was just as bad as bad could be. The Girlie Girl! The Girlie Girl! Could anything be more vulgar and inane!

"You are though now," said the maid, pushing the table that held the telephone nearer to the bedside. Claudia motioned her to leave the room.

Mrs. Iverson's voice was almost lost in a kind of weird moan with which she punctuated her sentences.

"I knew something awful was going to happen," she said. "I was warned by the spirits three times in succession....they told me that disaster was coming closer and closer. It's too awful, isn't it? Of course, we can't know her. Jack must be mad. I've sent for him to come to me at once, not, of course, that we can do anything now. I couldn't sleep and I heard two of the servants talking about it while they did the stairs. He must

divorce her or something. Fancy *marrying* a woman like that. Do you realize it, Claudia, I'm the mother-in-law of The Girlie Girl—I—I! My God, it's incredible. Why, musical comedy would have been better. Why didn't you stop it? Your father says he washes his hands of him, but that doesn't prevent her being my daughter-in-law. If only the spirits had been more explicit in their warnings....but spirits are always so vague.... I was afraid it meant that my masseur was going to die or my maid was going to leave me.... I'm prostrate.... What's the good of Jules massaging me when I've got troubles like this? Do get dressed and come round—it's as bad as having a funeral in the house, only, thank goodness, one doesn't have to go into black."

Claudia put back the receiver with a click, and Billie gave a bark to remind her that she had not greeted him kindly. She gave him an absent caress, her dark eyes, full of thought, looking out over his soft little head. How furious Gilbert would be! The Girlie Girl a sister-in-law of the rising young barrister! She had long ago divined his father's and mother's feeling against her own family, partly shared by Gilbert. Lady Currey would be delighted! A sarcastic smile curved her lips as Johnson came in again.

Johnson's eyes were glittering with excitement, for servants love a good, rousing scandal.

In her excitement she called her mistress by her old name. "Miss Claudia, Mr. Jack is downstairs and wants to see you at once. I told him you were in bed and hadn't had your breakfast——"

There was a knock on the door, followed by her brother's voice.

"Claudia, let me come in. I *must* speak to you."

Johnson looked at her, and for a moment Claudia's hands clenched themselves in helpless rage at the folly of her brother. "Let him come in," she said shortly, "and send me up my breakfast!"

Johnson opened the door and Jack came in, his face rather pitiable in its weakness and worry. He looked like a puppy that has lost its way. He was as smartly dressed and as well-groomed in person as usual—nothing short of an earthquake would have made him regardless of his attire, and then one felt he would have been resurrected trying to put his tie straight—but his usual placid expression of serene content with himself and that state of life into which Providence had pleased to call him was gone.

He looked at Claudia rather helplessly and yet appealingly, and some of the hardness of her glance melted. After all, it was the same silly old good-natured Jack.

“Johnson, wait a minute. Have you had some breakfast?”

“Yes—no—you never can get anything to eat at the flat.... I should like some coffee, Claudia. I think it might pull me together if it was strong and very hot.”

He came to the bedside and sat down rather heavily in a pink-cushioned chair. Mechanically he found his cigarette-case and opened it.

“Oh! I beg your pardon, old girl. I forgot it was your bedroom. It’s something to do.... You know all about it!”

She pointed without speaking to the paper flung in disgrace to the foot of the bed.

“Oh, well! you know, then. Everybody knows. She let it out last night. Women never can keep secrets.”

“Was she going to be your wife—secretly—for the rest of your life?” said Claudia sarcastically.

“Eh? Oh, well! I didn’t want people to know yet. She’s a clinking good sort, and don’t think”—with an expression like the puppy on the scent again—“that I regret marrying her. No, by Jove, I don’t. But she might have let me break the thing to—to everyone.”

“You can’t break things like that,” said Claudia sharply, “they break themselves. It’s like dropping an egg—it’s smash. Jack, I do believe this dog has got more sense than you have. I heard a rumour about this

marriage last night, and I laughed at it. I had a certain amount of respect for your—social intelligence. Brains you never did have, but you always had good manners. I'm utterly disgusted with you, and I never want to see you—or your wife—again."

"You haven't seen her yet," said Jack quickly. "So you can't judge things."

"I have no intention of seeing her," said Claudia, her lips tightly compressed, her eyes flashing with anger. "Do you expect me to take The Girlie Girl to my bosom and swear I love her as a sister?"

"Look here, Claudia, say what you like about me—oh, yes! I know it was a fool thing to do, although I don't regret it——" He passed his hand over his brow wearily, for his small brain, so little used, was unequalled to the strain. "I say again"—obstinately—"I don't regret, and I'm awful fond of her—she's a nut, I can't tell you—but of course I can see how you and mother and everyone look at it. I never would have believed I could have done it—I've always jeered at other fellows who married beneath them—but I was just crazy about her. You'll like her, Claudia," he bent forward with pathetic eagerness, his hand again seeking his cigarette-case, "she's not a bit like anyone else. All the men are in love with her, and she could have married most anyone she wanted."

Claudia's expression was so indicative of her feelings that he stopped. At that moment Johnson brought in the breakfast-tray. Jack looked at it with relief. It was something to do if only to eat and drink, and the cup of tea Polly had given him that morning had been "wash."

He noticed that Claudia's hand shook as she started to pour out the coffee, and at imminent danger to the tray and his own clothes, he caught hold of her hand.

"Give us your paw, Claud. I say, old girl, don't you go against me. I came to you at once; you've always been such a good chap, though you do scold me." With rough affection he put his arm round her and kissed her.

"I said to myself, 'Old Claudia will stand by me. She isn't a conventional duffer like the others. She'll see Fay's fascination, and, after all, a fellow's only got one life to live, and why can't I do as I like?' I've heard you say things like that time and time again, and Gilbert's contradicted you. I daresay I've done a silly thing, but if I don't regret it, what is it to anyone else? Only don't you round on me. It makes me feel as if I'd gone to my bath and there wasn't any water."

Claudia had to laugh, at first a little uncertainly, and then with wild abandon. Jack's similes, when he employed any, were always so absurd.

"Jack, get away, the point of your collar is puncturing my cheek.... Oh! you silly ass, how could you do it? Now you're upsetting the tray, and I love those pink cushions."

"Fay like everything pale blue, but then, she's got blue eyes. Such blue eyes! They're ripping, Claud. I must give Billy some sugar—we'll pretend it's off the wedding-cake. Claudie, next to you—at least, no, because you're so different, there isn't any next-to—but you and she are the most ripping women I've ever meet. I say, I *am* glad of this coffee. I'm going to see that Fay has some decent servants. Polly's a sketch, a fair sketch."

He was so frankly and boyishly relieved that she had "made it up." After all, he didn't mind very much about his father and mother—luckily his income was his own—but Claudia did matter. And he was honestly sure that Claudia would be fond of Fay when she knew her.

After a while Claudia put the question: "She is going to give up her profession, of course?"

His brow clouded. "Well, I want her to, and I've talked till my throat has got dry, but she says she's got 'contracts,' whatever that means, for the next six years. And she's so proud of them, too. Funny set of people, you know. What there is to be proud of in having to

work for six years more I can't for the life of me see. But she tells everyone."

"I suppose it means that she's a success and has been secured by certain theatres," said Claudia.

"Eh? Oh, yes! I suppose it does mean that. Oh, yes! I see. That's why she's proud. What a nut you are, Claudia, you are the brainy one of the family, right enough. How's Gilbert?"

She gave a slight shrug of her shoulders under the silken *matinée*.

"Have you had a row over me?" he said quickly. "Of course, you couldn't explain a thing like this to Gilbert."

"You include him among the conventional duffers?" said his sister, with an enigmatic smile, patting Billie with one hand.

"Er—well—of course, he's——"

"You're quite right, my dear brother. He's a conventional *old* duffer." Then, with an abrupt change of key: "But, after all, as you say, we've only got one life and we must each decide for ourselves how we will live it. Live, love and be merry, for to-morrow we grow old!"

"By Jove, old girl, that's the right spirit, and I really am awfully fond of Fay. And she's gone on me, too."

"You've been awfully in love with other girls before," said Claudia running her fingers through her soft, loosened hair, "but you haven't married them. How did it happen?"

He evidently concentrated on the subject for a moment before he answered:

"Blest if I quite know myself. I didn't mean anything of the kind at first, because I knew that she... I don't know whether she put it in my head or I put it in hers."

"You're a very rich man," said his sister softly.

"Yes, I know; and I daresay she wouldn't have

married me if I hadn't had a good deal of oof." Catching his sister's look of surprise, he said quickly, "Oh! I don't kid myself it was love, pure love. I don't believe there is any such thing. And she's as cute as they make them, only—she can be just the other way sometimes, too. She'll interest you, Claudia, she really will. I bet you haven't met anything like her before. You'll find her a bit of a puzzle all right. But she's got plenty of money of her own; she earns quite a big salary, she tells me, and though she lives in a sloppy sort of Bohemian way, there's always plenty to it and no end of fluff and frills. Got plenty of jewellery, too, that—that admirers have given her. I want to replace it all one day."

"She has had plenty of admirers, then?"

He coloured a little and looked away. "Oh, well! hang it all, who am I that I should hang out a blue ribbon?—no, that's teetotal, isn't it?—well, you know what I mean. But we're both going to stick to one another in future."

"But you haven't told me yet why you wanted to marry her?"

He ruminatively twisted his small fair moustache. "Well, I don't know. She didn't feel for me the way she felt for the other fellows, she said. Of course, they're an awful set, though I haven't told her so yet. And"—he got up and fidgeted with a photograph-frame, it contained a portrait of Colin Paton—"she's a queer little person, Fay. She's twenty-two and she says—she says it's time she became a mother, and she wants—the father—to be a gentleman. I daresay she'd—she'd have had it the other way—things like that don't matter so much to them—only, of course, I couldn't. You see that, don't you, old girl?"

Claudia's voice was very tender and affectionate as she answered:

"Run away now, old boy, and let me get up. Yes,

you couldn't, of course, and I'll do my best to smooth things over. Scribble down her address on that memorandum-tablet, will you?"

He came over to her and gave her a bear-like hug.

"You're a brick, Claudia. I always knew it.... I say, you haven't been looking the thing lately. Are you *quite* happy yourself?"

She unloosened a strand of hair from his coat-button with a little wince.

"Well, at any rate I married for love. And is anybody quite happy? I guess life is rather like those bottles of mixed sweets we used to have in the nursery. They were all called 'sweets,' but some of them were very sharp and acid, do you remember? We used to first dig out the sugary ones, but nurse afterwards insisted that we should eat the acid ones. Life is a thing of spots and streaks, Jack; that's all there is to it."

CHAPTER VI

UNE CHAMBRE À LOUER

THERE is some uncatalogued sense in man which seems immediately aware when a woman is at a loose end, when there is *une chambre à louer* in her heart. There is a story told of Don Juan which relates how the famous gallant was unsuccessful with three women in his life; one was a middle-class woman who adored her husband, the second was a nun who kept true to her vows, and the third was a *cocotte* who, having lived the "gay life" for many years and ".... grown old in the service of pleasure, love no longer made any appeal." The woman who is estranged from her husband, who no longer cares for him, has no need to proclaim the tidings upon the house-tops. Men are subtly and quickly aware that her heart is free, and consider not only that she is fair game for any arrows they may care to shoot, but that they are offering her something she cannot live without and that she is sure to accept from someone sooner or later. One often hears a man speak of an unhappy wife as that "poor little woman," but he never doubts that he can make her happy where her spouse has failed.

The face of life seemed now to change for Claudia. Her admirers were bolder with their compliments, more pressing in their invitations; and although some of them were secretly rather intimidated by her direct-glancing, critical eyes and occasionally cynical tongue, they gave her plainly to understand that she need not waste her sweetness upon the desert air. She had lost that happy, absorbed look a woman wears when she is in love, but her personality had gained from the social point of view, for she was more arresting, more vivid, and she had always been accounted a good companion and conversationalist. But Claudia had not studied *le monde où l'on s'ennuie* for some years for nothing, and though she had hitherto kept a little aloof from certain phases, she was not ignorant, nor likely to let her vanity lead her into foolishness. The obvious love-hunter only amused her, and she used such men just as much as it suited her convenience.

Besides Frank Hamilton she found only one man that really interested her and whose companionship she enjoyed—Charles Littleton, the American publisher. She had met him since their first dinner-party at one or two houses she frequented, and a sort of cheery understanding had grown up between them. Her brain was much more subtle than his, but he always responded when she led the way. He had a sense of humour and all sorts of stories to tell her of authors whom she only knew between bookcovers. His talk was always racy, and he occasionally used quaint idioms and expressions that gave his conversation a different flavour from that which was usually poured into her ears at dinners and at homes.

The breach between Claudia and Gilbert had not been lessened by Jack's *mésalliance*. Gilbert writhed under the publicity, and though he knew it was a nine-days' wonder and would soon evaporate, he was infuriated with the house of Iverson and the offspring of Circe. A letter

from his mother, quite illogical and trying to make him appear responsible for the marriage, made him more irritable. His reply to it was dignified, pointing out her untenable position—the attitude of a strong man towards women must be maintained, even with a mother—but he felt the sting of it all the same. His father, whom he met the next day, was not illogical, but there was an atmosphere of chilliness and silence on the subject which was probably more unpleasant to him than his mother's letter. A comic paper came out with a cartoon showing him giving advice on her contracts to The Girlie Girl. In view of it all, Claudia's attitude was the worst of all. She took up Jack's own attitude, that he was at liberty to do as he pleased with his life. She was logical and perfectly calm during their discussions, and Gilbert, to his great disgust, found himself forced into becoming illogical, which is enough to exasperate any lawyer, even a briefless one.

"It's a disgrace to us all," he said stormily, his sombre grey eyes dark under the lowered lids, "a beastly scandal."

"Why are *we* disgraced?" said Claudia calmly, also forced to assume a position she had never meant to take. "She's not your wife, she's Jack's." A satirical smile curved her lips as she tried to imagine Gilbert married to The Girlie Girl.

"A family stands or falls together," said Gilbert heavily, noting the smile with inward resentment. Lately he had often seen that smile on his wife's lips.

"Oh! surely not, nowadays. It is hard enough to have your own sins come home to roost, but to have your sister's and your brother's and your cousin's and your aunt's—Oh! life would be too hard!"

"Don't be flippant; we are discussing a serious matter."

"All the more reason not to lose our sense of humour. Undiluted seriousness is—the devil. After all, aren't we

making a great fuss over nothing in particular? I confess I was furious at first, but—Jack isn't a German Crown Prince or the heir of great possessions, you know. I daresay it's a lucky escape for some nice girl."

"A pretty way to speak of your own brother!" he flung at her.

"Oh, Gilbert! how old-fashioned you are! Don't you know a brother may be a friend or a stranger nowadays? I'm fond of Jack, but I don't think he is cut out to take a firm and virtuous position on the family hearthrug. He's always been much too good-looking and too rich to acquire goodness or have it thrust upon him. He seems genuinely fond of her. I am quite curious to see her."

She settled herself more comfortably in the corner of the couch and took up a book, as if to indicate that the subject was exhausted. Gilbert stood looking down upon her in his golfing kit. He made spasmodic efforts to take exercise—he had put on a couple of stone since their marriage—and being Saturday, he was free from his chambers. They both belonged to the club at Sunningdale, but lately he never suggested that she should accompany him. Secretly, he was ashamed that she should see how badly out of form he was, for Claudia played fairly regularly, and had a good, clean stroke of her own.

"See her?" he ejaculated. "I must ask you not to try and see her or identify yourself with this disastrous marriage in any way." He made use of the word *ask*, but the tone made it equivalent to *forbid*. He did not want to go and play golf, although he felt he ought to, and the picture that Claudia made in her soft silken draperies, snugly ensconced in the well-warmed room, gave an additional edge to his tone.

Claudia raised her expressive eyebrows and turned a page of the book.

"Really, Gilbert, I will not ask her here to meet you——"

"I should think not, indeed!"

"—but I have promised Jack that I will go and see her. What I do in future depends on—her and myself. After all, she is Jack's wife and he is fond of her."

"Do you know this woman is—is notorious, that she is what men call 'hot stuff'? Can't you see that she has only married your brother to fleece him and degrade his family?"

His eyes were black with anger and his lower lip protruded pugnaciously, just as his father's did. Claudia watched him, fascinated, for this was the first real quarrel they had had. In the midst of a pregnant silence the door opened, and the manservant announced "Mr. Paton."

They were both so angry that they had not time enough to pull down the blinds before Paton was in the room, and he saw two people as he had never seen them before. Then they both recovered themselves—Claudia more easily than her husband—and went forward to greet him.

"Colin, what a delightful surprise!" cried Claudia, taking his hand in hers. "I *am* glad to see you again." Perhaps there was also a little relief at the interruption of an unpleasant scene, but she was unfeignedly glad to feel his firm hand-clasp once more. She was almost surprised herself to find how glad she was.

"Hallo, old chap, back again, then?" said Gilbert. "It's good to see you. Safe and sound, eh? You look fit enough," he added, ruefully casting a look down at himself. "Why do some men put on fat and others don't?"

Paton laughed. "I suppose I belong to the lean kine. Yes, I think you have put on flesh, Gilbert."

In truth he was a little shocked at the deterioration in his old friend's appearance. He had always been rather heavy for his age, but now a heaviness of the

spirit as well as of the body seemed to have settled upon him. Surely the lids drooped more over the rather lifeless eyes, and his chin and jowl were coarser? He himself was much the same as when he had left England before the wedding, spare, erect, in obvious good form.

"It's abominable," said Gilbert. "It isn't what I eat, either."

The manservant opened the door again. "The car is at the door, sir."

"Going golfing?" smiled Paton. "Ah! I haven't done that for a great while. Sounds sort of homely and English. I'm sure you could beat me into a cocked hat, Claudia, and I used to give you—how many strokes a hole?"

"Ah! but I've been practising religiously with the deadly purpose of defeating you when you returned," laughed Claudia gaily, the colour back again in her smooth, creamy cheeks. It was jolly to see Colin again. One could always talk nonsense or sense to Paton, and she suddenly realized that nobody had ever taken his place in that respect. "I'll take you on to-morrow at Stoke Poges. I am thirsting for vengeance for old affronts."

"I say! I shall expect at least to get a ball in my eye or a gentle tap with the brassie. Still, let me like a golfer fall! I'll take you on. And, Gilbert, what's your form?"

"Oh! he's going down to see his parents to-morrow," replied Claudia carelessly, ringing for the tea. "When did you land?"

"Yesterday."

Claudia was pleased. He had lost no time in coming to see them.

Although Paton had been his friend long before he had known Claudia, Gilbert had a curious feeling that he was not wanted. He felt they were eager to talk over

many things. Paton would probably tell her all about his travels—well, travellers' tales were apt to be boring.

"I shall see you again soon, Colin. I'd arranged to go this afternoon."

"Let's have lunch together early next week."

"I will if I can, but I'm infernally busy just now. Get a vacation soon though, thank goodness."

The door closed behind him, and as if the impulse were mutual, they found themselves shaking hands again.

"Colin, what a long time you've been away. Don't dare to tell me you've any plans for going away again, because I shall *really* hit you on the head with the brassie and incapacitate you."

It was a woman who teased him now, not the fresh, eager-eyed girl he had left. But from most men's point of view she had gained more, much more than she had lost. She had acquired a nice, physical balance, that had been wanting before. She had the charm of early maturity. She was a woman who knew her power over men, and knew just what that power meant. She was on the surface even more frankly gay and charming, but it hid certain reserves. She would pretend to be more confidential and open, but would be less so. She would never shut a door with a bang in anybody's face, but it would be shut quietly all the same. In the few minutes that he had been with her, Colin realized all this and, mingled with his admiration for her development—for he found her far handsomer than she had been—there was a touch of regret for the girl who had talked about anything and everything, and as frankly answered questions as she asked them. She was Gilbert's wife, a woman of the world, and—a great deal more.

"Taking stock of me?" she laughed, meeting his eyes. "But I don't think Topsy had growed much this time."

"On the contrary, I think she has grown a good deal,"

he said quietly. "You haven't grown into a giraffe or a fat Boy Joey, but all the same you have grown."

She rested her head on her hand, her elbow propped on the arm of the couch, and looked speculatively at him. He reminded her of those days before her marriage, when she had spelt marriage with a capital letter. And—yes—she did look back at herself from one side of a huge gulf. Was that gulf growth? She realized more what life meant, and might mean. She had touched hard facts, unalterable laws of nature, great moments, petty awakenings....was all that growth?

"Perhaps you are right," she said slowly.

"I am sure I am right. You have shot up at an alarming rate. You think before you speak now, a most potent symptom! In the old days you would have blurted out 'I haven't grown,' with great suddenness and force, and I should have been laid low by your vehemence."

Claudia smiled. "You mean I begin to know that I don't know. I think I do realize that my landmarks are shifting."

"An awfully good sign," he said cheerfully. "I'm always pulling up mine and planting them again. A constantly uprooted landmark gathers no moss.... Do I smell the smell of muffins? Claudia, this is heaven, indeed, and you are the ministering angel."

"There isn't much of an angel about me," said Claudia, rather jerkily, when the servant had withdrawn. "If I'm growing—I'm growing much nastier. I'm growing so short-tempered and prickly, and——"

She stopped. She had heard a faint, a very faint sound at the door. Paton, whose hearing was as quick as her own, had heard it too.

"Is that my old friend, Billie the Blessed Dachshund?" he asked. "Bless his stumpy legs! May I let him in?"

She nodded, surprised to find that her eyes had suddenly filled with tears. Why, she did not know. What

had she been about to confess to him? It was just as well Billie had interrupted.

Billie gave Paton a royal welcome, a most unusual welcome for him. For of all the hands that caressed him, he liked Paton's next to his adored mistress. Billie would have told you that there are hands and hands. Some are heavy as lead on small dogs' heads, some are blunt and stupid, some are cold and clammy, and send a shiver down a dog's spine, and there are hands that are delicate and sensitive, and convey a sense of liking that is most comforting to the canine tribe.

"Verdict—not grown!"

They both laughed heartily, and Billie stood with a smile—it certainly was a smile—and with his tail wagging surveying them both.

"You have preserved your figure admirably, Billie. I'll proceed to put it in jeopardy with this lump of sugar.... How nice of you, Claudia, to remember no milk in my tea."

"I suppose you saw that Gilbert and I were having—what shall I call it?—a row when you came in?" said Claudia calmly, her hands busy among the silver. "Oh! we were in a most exciting part when the door opened."

"All couples quarrel occasionally, don't they?" he said lightly. "That's part of the joys of married life, isn't it? Marriage is a sort of licence to quarrel and afterwards make it up."

"Oh! we don't quarrel as a rule. Perhaps it would be better if we did. No, this was a special and particular quarrel, with a particular verse and chapter. You've heard of Jack's asinine marriage, of course?"

"Yes it was in the papers when I landed."

"What do you think about it?"

"Now, what is the good of asking me that? Do you want me to tell you what *I* wouldn't have done, or what

I think he should have done? What's the use? He's done what he wanted to do."

"Ah! you take that attitude too."

"What can one say about a man's marriage, except perhaps to regret or be glad? I don't pretend that if I were a boy's father, I shouldn't be horribly annoyed with him for doing a thing that will probably be a failure. It was a surprise to you?"

"Absolutely. You know the sort of man Jack is. There have always been Girlie Girls of sorts. Only marriage is a different proposition, isn't it? 'Blest be the tie that binds,' et cetera."

He nodded. "A great pity, of course. Have you seen her? What is she like?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen her yet. That was the finishing touch to our quarrel. I've promised Jack to go and see her. After all, Jack is my brother, and he put it in such a way that—well, I felt I wanted to see her. I suppose she will be too awful for words?"

He hesitated for a moment. He wondered why it jarred on him, the idea of her going to see Fay Morris. He had heard a good many stories about her, and he had several times come in contact with music-hall artistes—there had been some on the boat he went out on. But he was catholic in his tastes and mind, and personally he would never have drawn aside from contact with another human being. But Claudia with Fay Morris, Claudia in the Bohemian, over-heated atmosphere of the music-hall!

"Yes, I see, you think it will be all that. I suppose Jack is quite mad."

He forced himself to be just. "I don't think we can say that. You know, all sorts of stories go round about such people, and she may be quite—quite maligned. She is young, only twenty-two, and there's every chance with youth, you know. She can't be viciously fair, fat and

forty. And you were always interested in humans, Claudia."

"Oh, yes! I still am, more so than ever. If someone were just taking me to see her as a curiosity, it would be different. But, Colin, she's my sister-in-law! Suppose she talks Cockney, and drops her aitches, and calls me 'dearie' or something!"

"Perhaps it won't be as bad as that," suggested Colin, not liking the picture at all, and wishing he could go with her. "What does Jack say about her?"

"Oh! nothing that tells you anything. And I can't ask such questions of him, can I? Of course, Gilbert is furious at the idea of my going to see her. I think—I think he was going to forbid me to go and visit her, when you came in. What do you think?"

He hesitated, for he knew it was a ticklish matter to arbitrate, or attempt to do so, between husband and wife.

"I don't need to think at all," he said, after a pause. "You're his sister, and you've got to do the thinking. And what you think should go, as the Americans say."

"Ah!" She drew a deep breath and put her hand impulsively on his arm, a little trick she had with people she liked. "You are a real comfort, Colin. In future I shall throw all my problems on you."

Frank Hamilton came in, as he was patting her hand, the two standing close together, and instant jealousy and suspicion filled him at the sight. It was the first time he had ever seen Claudia show any particular favour to a man, she was rather difficult to approach, and though it encouraged him not to be too diffident, he was also very angry with her. A couple of years ago he would have shown by his manner that he had noticed the little incident, but he had learned some of the usages of Mayfair, and he controlled himself. It showed itself, however, in a little stiffness.

"Oh! Mr. Hamilton, let me introduce you to my old

friend, Mr. Colin Paton. He has just come back from the Argentine, where I suppose there are no pictures?"

"Only Nature's, and those of the most wonderful. I read an account of one of your exhibitions in a paper that was sent out to me, Mr. Hamilton. I should have liked to see that show."

"Mr. Paton educated my taste in pictures," said Claudia, with a friendly glance at him. "He insisted on my liking the good things, and then I really did."

"Don't believe her, Mr. Hamilton, she was always an excellent natural judge of pictures."

"But I did like them rather painty, at first, Colin, you must admit that. Do you remember that Leighton I adored and the Dicksee I found so poetical? And I made you stand and gaze at them, too. You must have stored up many a grudge against me for that."

Hamilton had heard Claudia speak of "a friend now abroad," who had been her constant companion at picture-galleries and who had lent her several art books. But he had somehow got the idea that the friend was middle-aged, if not old. He wondered how he had got the idea, but something in Claudia's tone had conveyed it to his mind. The man that he saw was neither quite young, middle-aged, nor old, and yet Hamilton felt there was a steady fund of youth in him. He instinctively understood that this man's judgment would be worth having, that those quiet, keen eyes would make short work of his careless and meretricious paintings. For, though usually he was amply content with his own ability, he was aware at intervals that some of it left much to be desired, both in form and execution. He had a heaven-born gift for catching a likeness, and a great feeling for colour, but his technique was faulty, and lately he had done too much and too little.

"I shall be giving another exhibition next month. I hope you will come to it," he replied.

"I shall make a point of doing so."

"We'll go together," said Claudia promptly, so promptly and so simply that some of the sting went out of his jealousy. After all, this man was exceedingly good form, and all that, but he was not good-looking, and though he knew about art, apparently he did nothing in that line. And Claudia had told him that she liked people who did things.

He determined to make a possible enemy into a friend. "Mr. Paton, if you are interested in the service of art, do persuade your friend here to give me some more sittings for her portrait. I made a ghastly failure of my first attempt, but I think I can do much better now. I've got the thing in my mind and I'm aching to begin."

"Having your portrait painted, Claudia? That's good news. To increase the joy of nations you must give him some sittings."

"It's so tiresome sitting still," said Claudia, looking at him plaintively out of the corners of her eyes. "I never was great at sitting still." Woman-like, she did not give the real reason. She had begun to be afraid of those sittings, and as she met Frank's eyes she felt that feeling re-awaken. He was too good-looking, too attractive to sit to.

"There!" exclaimed Frank. "That's what an artist has to contend with. Laziness, pure laziness! And she calls herself interested in art!"

"Paint Mrs. Jacobs instead," teased Claudia, with a gleam of mischief in her eyes, which set his blood afire.

"I've said it—inwardly.... Mr. Paton, help me."

"I would like to see a good portrait of you," said Colin earnestly. "You ought to make such a good subject. I quite understand Mr. Hamilton's anxiety to paint you. Do it—for the sake of your friends."

She looked at Hamilton, but she really answered Paton. After all, she had not too many real friends, and he was

the best of them all, the most faithful, the most reliable and unchanging.

“Very well. I’ll make a martyr of myself in the cause of friendship. I’ll come one day next week. Will that do?”

CHAPTER VII

"MISS FAY MORRIS THAT WAS"

IT was still only a little past five when the two men departed, and Claudia found herself alone with a very restless mood. Had it been earlier she would have gone out and walked in the Park, for she often tramped away a mood of restlessness. But it was grey and dismal outside. She glanced at the piano, but that was not the right thing. She picked up her book—one of Anatole France's—but that also she put down again in a very few minutes. Then the idea came to her. Her eyes opened widely and she caught her under-lip with her small teeth. Would she?

Billie looked at her, and he knew she was going out.

"No, Billie, can't take you this time. Oh! well, yes, you can stop in the car."

"What hat will madame wear?" said Johnson, her hand on the cupboard that contained her hats.

Claudia considered carefully, and decided on her most becoming one. It was a delightful possession, mostly composed of pearl-grey feather shading to the softest pink, and round her neck she wore a little necklet to

match. Johnson wondered why she was so excited that she pulled a button off her gloves and demanded a fresh pair. It seemed as though her mistress was not going to make an ordinary call.

"Now, Billiken, we must be off. I wonder! I wonder!"

She went over first to her writing-table and abstracted a little bit of paper. Jack's writing was atrocious, but she could decipher it with some difficulty. 25A, Gilchrist Mansions, Bloomsbury.

The car threaded its way through the crowded streets, and after what seemed a long time to Claudia, it stopped before a large block of flats, very red and very white, and obviously trying to show how gloomy was the rest of the square. Evidently it was a new block, and for this Claudia was thankful. Ugly youth is better than ugly age.

There was a lift, which she entered, with a rather obsequious and yet familiar liftman, who, when she asked—after some natural hesitation—for *Mrs. Iverson*, said, "Miss Fay Morris that was, you mean, madam? Oh, yes! it's the third floor." Claudia fancied that he eyed her curiously as he manipulated the wires. She tried to brace herself for the ordeal, for now she was ascending in the lift she felt like hurriedly descending and running away. There was no doubt it was an ordeal. It is quite bad enough in the ordinary way to have to make the first call on a new sister-in-law, but when she is "Miss Fay Morris that was," whose portraits adorned the entrances of several music-halls, it is a colossal undertaking. She wished most heartily she had asked Jack to take her. Why had she not thought of that? How foolish of her. But now she was here she must face the music. Perhaps Jack would be there. If so, it would be all right. And yet, in a way she would rather not have him there, for though he was as stupid as an owl, there was a sort of

understanding between them, and he would know what impression his wife was making on her.

She rang the bell and waited. There was no answer. Ah! a reprieve. She was turning away, but the liftman said reassuringly, "Ring again, ma'am. She's in, I know. But the parrot makes such a noise they can't hear the bell."

So that was the meaning of the curious screeching she had heard while waiting, like someone at the mercy of a clumsy dentist. How could anyone stand such awful sounds!

The door opened and a servant, still in a print dress, nodded when she asked if Mrs. Iverson were at home. The screeching had grown worse, and Claudia quite understood why the servant nodded. She noticed that she wore no cap and that her hair was outrageously frizzed and curled. Was this the servant Jack had called "a sketch, a fair sketch"?

The good-sized hall was cheery enough with plenty of red paper and red carpet, perhaps a thought too cheerful, as though the decorator had said, "Now let's have a cheerful hall, a very cheerful hall." There was a large imitation oak stand, crowded with oddments in the way of coats. Claudia caught glimpses of a white knitted coat, a long squirrel one, a dark fur stole and two or three overcoats. There were any amount of umbrellas, walking-sticks, etc., and over all was a strong smell of cooking.

"Chuck it! Chuck it! Chuck it!" shrieked the parrot from somewhere near at hand. Claudia gave a start.

"Only that blessed bird," said the servant. "She's in there, miss."

She jerked her head in the direction of a door that was a little ajar and suddenly departed. Claudia opened her lips to speak, but the maid had gone.

"Chuck it! Chuck it!" came more faintly from evidently the kitchen regions.

Claudia felt a strong desire to laugh. Then she heard

a voice singing in a room on her right. It seemed to be the door the servant had indicated. The voice was untrained, but of a good quality, sweet and rather high-pitched.

"I'm good little Lucy who lives in the dell,
And what I don't know is——"

The rest seemed somehow smothered and she could not catch the words.

Claudia tapped at the door in considerable embarrassment. Would she have to announce herself, and what would she say?

She pushed open the door gently and she saw a most remarkable sight, nothing less than a pair of exquisitely shaped little legs and feet in white silk tights that seemed to belong to a frilly pink lampshade. That was Claudia's first impression, and then she saw that someone had her back to her, delving down into a huge trunk. Her second impression was that she had never seen a room that was so blue! There were pale blue curtains, wallpaper and bed-spread, blue flowers on the carpet and satin bows everywhere.

"Is that you, Madam Rose?" said a voice from the depths, which was rough and unrefined, but was *not* Cockney. "Half a jiff. I can't find my pink shoes and——"

"I beg your pardon," said Claudia, standing in the doorway, "but I am not Madame Rose. The maid did not——"

Claudia had just time to catch a glimpse of a piquant little face with great surprised blue eyes, when there was a cry of pain. The lid of the trunk, a heavy, clamped one, had descended on the small hand.

"Oh, gracious!" said the ballet-like person, hopping about holding her hand; "oh! that damned trunk! Ouch! My goodness! it's nearly broken my knuckles."

Her little face was screwed up with pain, so that she hardly looked at her visitor. Claudia's eyes caught sight of a jug of water steaming away on the untidy wash-stand, and she quickly went over to it.

"Here," she said, "put your hand in this jug. That will stop the pain and prevent it discolouring. Yes, I know how those things hurt."

The hand was so small that it easily slid down into the jug. Claudia marvelled at its size, and then she noticed that the girl was hardly up to her shoulders. Why, it looked like a small child. This could not be The Girlie Girl, surely?

Then she became aware that the wrinkles had come undone and that the big blue eyes were looking at her.

"My word!" The blue eyes stared at her with the directness and *naïveté* of a child. The small mouth dropped open a little as companion in the process. "Who are you? I thought at first you were Madame Rose with my new set of curls, and then cocking half an eye at you, I thought you must be Maudie de Vere. But—who on earth are you?"

"Is your hand better?" said Claudia, half smiling, half embarrassed. "Please tell me first, are you—Fay?"

The girl looked at her with a sudden seriousness. "Yes, and I guess who *you* are. You're Jack's sister, aren't you?"

"Yes," returned Claudia. "I'm Jack's sister. I am sorry to come in this unceremonious way into your bedroom——"

"Oh! that doesn't matter," said Fay, never taking her eyes off Claudia's face, "everybody comes in here when they want me, because I'm hardly ever out of it.... My!"—her feelings overcoming her—"you *are* handsome! Jack told me you were good-looking, but he didn't tell me you were such a stunner. I never saw anyone so pretty."

It was impossible to resent the frank criticism or the speaker as she stood there in her most extraordinary attire. For the fluffy, chiffrony petticoats ended just below the knees, and over her shoulders she had thrown a lacy matinée jacket, adorned with pale blue ribbons and showing a neck and throat perfect in a miniature way. Her hair—jet black and in remarkable contrast to her eyes, which seemed as though they should belong to a head of flaxen hair—was rather short, but fell about her shoulders in curly masses.

Claudia was completely at a loss how to answer this very naive tribute to her charms. But Fay was used to making the entire conversation, and she went on without noticing any lack of conversational powers on the part of her visitor.

"I might have known it wasn't Maudie, though, because she uses so much scent it's like a chemist's shop coming into your room. I like a little sprayed on myself, but she puts it on with a garden hose. I've told her about it heaps of times. I think it's such bad taste, don't you?"

It was not quite the conversation Claudia had vaguely imagined. And yet, though Fay gabbled on, her words coming at a tremendous speed, she felt that her hostess was taking good stock of her. At the back of those childish eyes there was a shrewd little brain. She showed this by her next words:

"You're hopping mad with Jack and me, aren't you? I never saw Jack in such a state as the morning when the thing came out in the newspaper." She gave a little chuckle. "I must say I enjoyed it. I like to keep my name before the public, for one thing. You've got to keep on working some sensation, or you're passed over." She pulled her hand out of the jug and dried it on a towel, which she flung on the very ornate bed. It had a lace coverlet over pale blue satin, and enormous bows

of pale blue satin ribbon ornamented the corners. A huge nightdress-case of the same satin painted with pink roses was lying on the frilled pillows, which were also threaded with pale blue.

She came over to where Claudia was standing. "I say, don't be mad with me. I like you. I didn't think I would. I thought you'd be starchy and turn up your nose at me. It was nice of you to think of that hot water for my hand. Sit down and make friends with me, will you?"

Claudia appreciated her charm as she stood in front of her, playing with her sable muff. It was the charm of the *gamine*-child.

"I—I came to have a little talk with you," returned Claudia, smiling. You simply could not help smiling at it.

"That's right. Sit down. Bless me, there never is a chair that isn't littered up." She took a handful of clothes and threw them carelessly on the floor. "Now just sit down there and tell me what the people you know say about me. I suppose I shouldn't have married Jack, and I told him at first he'd better run away and play with Lady Somebody or other. But he wouldn't go. He'll tell you that if you ask him."

"I'll take your word for it," returned Claudia as Fay energetically seized a brush and commenced to brush her hair.

"Oh! bother!" she said, stopping short, "and I want those curls. Madame Rose is a blighter all right. She promised them for to-day. Well, Polly will have to rake those other curls over and make them presentable." She went to the door and shouted, "Polly! Polly! come here quick."

A red-haired girl came running in, her hands all wet and soapsuddy. "Miss Fay, I'm just washing your stockings."

"Leave 'em and come and dish up these curls. That old beast hasn't sent my new set. Look, Polly, this is Mr. Jack's sister. Isn't she lovely?"

The red-haired girl stared at Claudia with her greeny-brown eyes. Claudia had never been inspected by a servant in such a manner before. Her lips twitched, but she assisted Polly by looking straight at her.

"She ain't much like the Capting, is she?" Polly said in strong Cockney. "But then, I ain't a bit like my brother. He's in the army too. I always say as brothers and sisters——"

"Don't chatter so much. Take those curls and vanish." Fay waved her small hand imperiously, and Polly, grabbing a bunch of curls, went out. "We don't want her in here listening to us, do we?" said Fay confidentially. "Not but that Polly knows most everything. She was on the halls once herself—doing small stunts with an acrobat—and she got rheumatic fever. My mother saved her life and kept her going for goodness knows how long. When mar died, she came to me as a sort of dresser. And she runs everything here." She waved her hand round the apartment. "The tradesmen don't do her. As far me, I'm no good at housekeeping. Don't know a chicken from a turkey. Of course, Jack says she isn't smart enough. He says he wants me to have some proper servants. But, what's the trouble? I'm comfortable, and that's everything, isn't it?"

"The best of servants can only make you comfortable," conceded Claudia, looking at the littered apartment. There was a cup and saucer on the dressing-table, and the spoon was on the floor. Some biscuits and an orange were side by side with a powder-puff and a scent-spray. One satin slipper rested on the pin-cushion, and a pair of silk stockings were thrown over the mirror, which had enormous wings and occupied a large amount of the

available space. Fay was busily putting up her hair as she talked.

"You know, I'm awfully gone on your brother. I never met anyone like him before." Now she was energetically rubbing cold cream all over her neck and arms. "I like to make up at home. It's much more comfortable. Those dressing-rooms are so draughty. Have you ever seen me? But of course you have. I suppose *everybody* has. I top the bill at most of the halls now. And I make a row when I don't. Do you like my turn?"

"I'm sorry to say I seldom go to variety houses," said Claudia, feeling somehow that she ought to have seen her.

"What!"—she turned, with her face smothered with grease. "You haven't seen me do my turn? Jack must take you this very night. He'll be along soon."

"Oh! I—er—am afraid I'm engaged to-night."

Polly returned and planked the curls down on the dressing-table.

"Here you are, miss, and Mr. Robins is out in the hall. He wants to see you." She grinned. "He's got a bucket for yer."

"What!" Fay screamed gleefully, "old Joey Robins! Why, this is worth a week's screw." She rushed to the door just as she was and called out: "Come in, Joey, my boy. I'm awful glad to see you."

She flung her arms round the neck of a man whose face was typically that of a low comedian of the old school. He was funny even off the stage, and Claudia vaguely remembered the name. He was somewhere about fifty, and had a habit of blinking as he talked, like a parrot. Claudia found out afterwards that he had acquired it for stage purposes—the audiences shrieked at him when he just blinked and did nothing else—and he could not rid himself of it in private life.

"Come in, do. Joey, this is my sister-in-law. You

know Joey? You may not know me, but you know Joey all right. Joey Robins on the Razzle-Dazzle! My! that was a good number, wasn't it?"

She put her head on one side and her hands on her hips, and began to skip about, humming a catchy tune.

Claudia found the comedian was extending a large and very rough hand. "Glad to make your acquaintance, miss. I say, Fay, there's a turnip for you outside. Shall I fetch it in?"

"Rather! You don't mean it's—— Oh! Joey, you darling!" It was an immense bouquet of the old-fashioned kind, and it was tied with long, streaming ribbons of white satin. "I told 'em not to stint the ribbing. I said, my little gal don't get married hevery day. Well, my dear, how does it agree with you?"

"Oh, fine!" she laughed, using a little brush to darken her eyelashes. "Wasn't you surprised when you saw it in the papers?"

"No," said the man, still blinking, "not exsakerly surprised. I always said you was fit to be a princess. I see you're at the Royal this week? Best advertisement you hever 'ad, my girl."

"And I don't forget I owe it all to you," she said earnestly, leaving off with one eyelash blacked. "Yes," turning to Claudia, who did not feel left out in the cold, because Fay took it for granted that she was interested in this queer, common man who had come in, "he got me my first engagement, and I don't forget it."

"Oh, go on! it was nothing."

"Well, I shall never make light of it," she said, with a vigorous nod of her small head, now entirely overweighted with the curls she had pinned on. They spoil the shape of her head and stuck out in masses about her ears. Fay went on quickly with the making-up process. "You gave me a shove here and a shove there, and now I've got into high society, I don't forget those who

helped me. I'm going to give a dinner to celebrate the wedding—you must come"—nodding friendly-wise to Claudia—"and so must you and your missus, Joey."

"It's kind of you, Fay, but I'll be up north for the next month." He looked at a large gold watch, the chain of which meandered over a waistcoat of startling pattern. "Can't stay many minutes. Got to get down to Reading to-night. Came up a purpose to bring you the turnip."

"You're a duck, Joey. Polly! *Polly!* Bring in a bottle of fizz. Sharp's the word! Yes, Joey, it's a special occasion and I'd like *her* to have some too. You know"—speaking to both of them—"I never take nothing until after I've done my work, unless it's a glass of stout, but Joey's got to drink me a proper health. Come on, Polly, bring a glass for yourself."

"Hallo, Polly!" said Joey, "still ginger, eh? My, we're getting on in the world, ain't we? You fancy yourself, waiting on the wife of a capting, don't yer? I'll do that for yer. You hold the glass."

"It's the best fizz," said Fay, who was now putting the rouge thickly on her cheeks. "It costs ten shillings a bottle and that's wholesale price too. I know a man—do you know Sam Levy? He's got an interest in a champagne business, or something. Anyway, I told him to get me some of the best. Jack says it's too sweet, But I like it that way. The other stuff tastes like ginger-ale. When I have fizz I like to know it's fizz. But there"—she turned to Claudia, who at half-past six in the evening somehow found herself holding a glass of champagne—"I suppose you drink champagne every night of your life, don't you?"

At that instant Jack came in at the door, which was wide open.

"Just in time old boy," called out Fay. "This is my old friend Joey Robins—my husband."

"Please to meet you sir—I mean capt'ing," murmured Joey Robbins, blinking at him. "You're got the smartest little woman in the world as your wife, sir. There's no one to touch her in her perfession. Lord! she did for old Joey long ago. She fairly beat his heart to a pulp."

Jack had just caught sight of Claudia, and his face was a curiosity to behold.

"But," said Joey, with a rough note of kindly earnestness in his voice, "no larking any more, Fay, my dear. Be a good child, be a good child."

Fay slipped her arm round Jack's neck, standing on a footstool to do so.

"We're both going to be good children, aren't we, Jack? We've both been a bit flighty, but we're going to be good now. I'm going"—her blue eyes opened widely, and she gave Jack a hearty hug—"to be a responsible person in future. Drink, all of you. Drink to the health of a pair of naughty children who are going to be good!"

It was not a bit as Claudia had planned it, but she found herself obediently drinking the health of her brother and sister-in-law in very bad and very sweet champagne.

CHAPTER VIII

"TWO IN A STUDIO"

TWO days later Claudia was wrinkling her brows over her visiting-list, and sadly contemplating the people she had been shunting, and who *must* be asked to dinner, when she was surprised to hear Gilbert's voice outside the door. He had been confined to bed for the last few days with a sharp attack of influenza, and Neeburg had forbidden him to go out.

She rose and opened the door. Outside was her husband, with his hat and coat on.

"Gilbert!"

"I'm going down to my chambers for an hour or two. I'm sick of this coddling, and the only thing to do is to work it off. It was a mistake to take to bed at all. I'm convinced you bring on illnesses that way."

"Come in a minute. Did Dr. Neeburg say you might go?"

"No. Doctors always try and keep you in bed, and Fritz is no better than the rest of them."

His face was flushed and unhealthy in colour. His eyes seemed more sombre than ever, and he was obviously quite unfit to go out of the house.

"Gilbert, this is madness. Have you looked at yourself in the glass? At least wait to see the doctor this morning. Surely your work can wait for awhile, or one of your clerks can come down as he did yesterday?"

"I've got to be in court on a big case four days hence, and all my books and things are down there. Lots of people have influenza and don't stop indoors. I'm strong; I'll soon throw the thing off if my mind is occupied."

She did not know what to say. She knew it was very unwise for him to go out, but, after all, she could not force him to stay indoors. Neeburg had told her privately that he was very much run down and needed a good rest. Was it a good thing to tell a man he was not as strong as he thought he was? Gilbert was always so proud of his robust health, and so contemptuous of weaker men. An old friend of his, a barrister, who often secured his services, had recently had to go for a sea-voyage owing to nerve-strain, and Gilbert had commented on it with a complete lack of sympathy and understanding. People who got ill easily he dubbed "weaklings."

"Well, Gilbert," she said gravely, "of course I can't make you keep to the doctor's orders, but I do ask you to give yourself a fair chance. You know"—tentatively—"you have really been overworking for a long time, and your constitution may be strong, but you can't tax it when you have an attack of influenza."

"I'm all right," he said rather truculently. "And I'm going down in the car to a well-warmed room. It won't harm me, and I shall feel easier in my mind. I loathe having nothing to do."

She looked at him, and wondered what he would do if he had a real long illness. The whole man was his work, and his work was the man. He had practically no hobbies, no pursuits, no amusements. When she had married him he had been keen on golf, but even that he had dropped.

Suddenly she said to him, "Do you ever wonder how I spend my days, Gilbert?"

He looked at her in dull surprise. "Oh! women always find something to do, don't they? Dressmakers, shopping, et cetera. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. You know Frank Hamilton is painting my portrait, don't you?"

"Yes, I think you did tell me. Is it going to be good?"

He was obviously not very interested, and anxious to be gone.

"Yes, I think so, this time. But he needs a good many sittings.... Do you like Frank Hamilton?"

"I never thought about it. Yes, I suppose he's all right for an artist. Well, I must go now. I daresay I shan't be away many hours."

"Gilbert," she said pleadingly, "don't go. You are not fit, really. If you don't want to stop in bed, stay here with me and read some books, or if your eyes hurt, I'll read to you. There's such an amusing biography here."

He shook her hand off his coat-sleeve and went towards the door. "I'm too restless, Claudia. Tell Neeburg I had to go."

He was gone, and Claudia walked back to her desk. Though various thoughts were buzzing through her head, inflammatory, rebellious thoughts, she completed the list of undesirables and requested the honour of their company at dinner. Most of the stodgy ones were friends of Gilbert's family and good and worthy men at the Bar, with their good and worthy wives.

At last Claudia laid down her pen and took up the telephone. Frank's voice answered her at the other end.

"I say, I told you I couldn't come this afternoon for the sitting. But I find I can, after all. Is it still convenient?"

"Yes, and I'm delighted to hear it. I haven't seen you for three whole days—an eternity!"

"What a pretty speech!" mocked Claudia; "but I've got the grain of salt here."

"You can laugh at me if you like, but it only makes things worse. I sometimes wonder if you are quite heartless. Don't you believe in any man?"

"Not—not if I can help it. Well, I'll be with you about three. I can't talk now; I'm busy."

But she sat for half an hour quite unoccupied, at least

she had no tangible occupation. She wrote no letters and she sent no more invitations. The only thing she did was to light a cigarette and stare out of the window at the bare branches of the trees, just faintly beginning to bud. And yet she was not thinking of the view, for she looked for quite five minutes at the Albert Memorial, and it was an edifice she loathed. Her face was set and expressionless, only her eyes burned like live, glowing coals in her head.

Rhoda Carnegie was lunching with her. She had rung up earlier in the day and requested the meal, saying quite frankly that a man had failed her and that she wanted some decent food.

Claudia neither liked nor disliked her, she had got used to her, for every now and then she had drifted into the Iverson household.

Rhoda was late, but as Claudia knew her habits she had ordered lunch a quarter of an hour later than usual.

"I'm late, dear. So sorry. But I put on six hats and hated them all, so I've come out in the ugliest." It was a queer-shaped one, that showed the tip of her nose and part of an ear.

"Aren't you afraid you'll get run over when you wear a hat like that?" laughed Claudia.

"It does make the day seem gloomy, I admit. But a hat like this intrigues a man. He doesn't know what else there is to it. There nothing like mystery about a hat. Well, and how goes *l'affaire Hamilton*?"

Claudia started to frown and then changed her mind. Rhoda was not actively malicious, except when she hated a rival, and a frown would be wasted on her.

"Oh! quite nicely," she said coolly, inwardly a little startled that it should have come to that. "I think the picture will be a success this time."

"Ah! if I were interested in a portrait-painter I should certainly have my portrait painted, but that type

doesn't appeal to me, and I hate having to talk art and look at daubs that are not half as nice as the things they represent. We hate one another most cordially. Two *poseurs* together, you know. It takes a *poseur* to catch a *poseur*."

Claudia stopped in the act of raising a glass of hock to her lips. "You consider him a *poseur*?"

Haven't you spotted that?" drawled Rhoda. "I wish I could afford a decent cook. No, you wouldn't. You think he has an artistic soul. I am certain he hasn't. But if you don't rub the veneer too hard I daresay it won't come off while you are playing with it."

"I don't see why you call him a *poseur*," returned Claudia. "Unless you think we are all *poseurs* and—well, one has to wear clothing!"

"I'll call it acting if you like it better. Wasn't it Meissonier who said, 'Painters always have in them something of the actor, they have the instinct for attitude and gesture'? But he's clever, he acts rather well. So do I. And a pose is justified by its cleverness."

She leaned forward on the table and smiled in her hostess's face.

"My dear, don't think I am trying to say that his love for you is a pose. But—well, naturally. You are very handsome and an excellent companion. Shall I tell you what he is *not*?"

"If you like," said Claudia, with an affectation of indifference.

"He is not working for art's sake. He is not generous, except to himself. He is not quite a gentleman—yes, let me finish—either by birth or natural feeling. And he is not—good enough for you, *ma chère*."

"There is hardly any question——" began Claudia hotly.

"Claudia, don't pretend. It's not necessary with me. I daresay he is more amusing than Gilbert, but still, he's

not the right man. One's husband is an accident; a lover is sometimes—a mistake. After all, in spite of the sweetest poodles and coon-can, love is the one thing that interests women. But be careful with Frank Hamilton. He is the sort if a man who gives a woman away, and discretion is the first requisite for a lover."

Claudia ignored the bigger issues. It was impossible to snub Rhoda.

"You don't like him, and therefore you are prejudiced," she replied, playing with a fat little quail on her plate. "What do you know about him?"

"I know he is the son of a small country solicitor who used to live at Salisbury. Now he lives in Kensal Green Cemetery. His grandfather was the butcher of that town, and I believe his grandfather wanted to put Frank into his business, but——"

"Oh, Rhoda! don't be ridiculous. Besides, what does it matter what his grandfather was? You're talking like Lady Currey now. And it's so old-fashioned!"

"Pooh! I don't care about people's ancestors, although I think a butcher peculiarly unpleasing, let us say. Loin-chops and rumpsteaks are so prosaic. No, that isn't the point. He hasn't got the innate feelings of a gentleman. and with his upbringing he would let any woman down. There are some things that men of the world with decent breeding don't do. And now tell me what the scandal is about Lucy Morgan and the card that dropped on the floor?"

At three, Claudia left Rhoda with the box of cigarettes—she had already smoked five—and the latest thing in novels, and went to Frank's studio. She felt rather self-conscious as she ascended the stairs, for now someone had labelled it *l'affaire Hamilton* it seemed to have taken a different complexion. Well, other women were all having flirtations, why not she? She had never meant to; she recalled how she had looked on such

affairs during her engagement—not with disgust, her upbringing was against that, but she had been sorry for the women who had to fill up their lives in underhand ways. Life had looked so easy then, now she was beginning to realize that life is most subtle, most complex, most alluring and—most disappointing.

She involuntarily stopped and gave a delicate sniff as she entered the studio. It was full of some over-sweet perfume.

"Have you upset a bottle of perfume?" she asked. "This is sweetness twice distilled."

He went to the window hastily. "Don't accuse me of using perfume. One of my sitters."

"Heavens! who uses such a perfume?"

He busied himself with the chair she was to sit in. "Oh, you've met her. Mrs. Jacobs."

"Mrs. J—— Oh, yes! the yellow lady with much wealth. Well, you might make something odd and bizarre out of her. But perhaps she wants to be depicted as a blush-rose?"

"Don't let's talk about her. I don't want to remember any other woman when you are here.... No, that arm isn't quite right." His hand was subtly caressing as he bent it into the position required, and it sent a little physical thrill through her. But when she met his eyes, he saw only a mocking light in them. All the same, he was quick to detect a slight difference in her attitude towards him. After the episode of the drive home from Hampstead he had been at first furiously angry, but after a while her very elusiveness had intrigued him to fresh efforts. His experience with women had been that they were always rather shy when it came to the last moves in the game; and Claudia was certainly a prize in the feminine market.

"You don't know the happiness it gives me to work on your portrait.... Just look a little more to the left—

a trifle more—yes, that's right.... You must give me the chance of finishing it. I shall be restless and unhappy until it is done.... Don't make me more unhappy than I am already," he concluded softly.

The studio was very warm—too warm, and the scent still lingered in the air. It was an unpretentious apartment, but it had not that bare, unclothed look which distinguished some artists' studios. Frank declared that he worked better in a coloursome atmosphere, and he had picked up some beautiful Oriental hangings, subdued but rich, which draped the walls with dull gold and reds. The few pieces of furniture were good. Frank had bought them very cheaply from a former tenant.

"I don't see why you should be unhappy," answered Claudia languidly, watching him mix some colours on his palette. "Young and successful, that ought to be enough to make a man happy."

"Unsuccessful in the one thing that he really wants," replied the man at the easel, with a quick glance at her.

Claudia knew it was injudicious to continue in this strain, but something within her, reckless and craving for excitement, urged her on.

"We never get the things we really want. That would be Paradise.... And what do you want so particularly?"

"What I am afraid there is no chance of gaining," he replied softly; "the heart of the dearest, most beautiful woman in the world."

"You want—a good deal."

"Nothing less would content me."

The studio was on the roof of a building in Victoria Street and was reached by a long flight of stairs from his living apartments below. Somewhere down there a middle-aged, flat-footed woman acted as his servant, but she never came into the studio unless Frank rang for her. The sounds of the traffic made a dull, heavy

grumbling below, but no other noise intruded upon them.

He looked at his sitter and he found her very desirable and very beautiful, especially to-day, with that touch of languor, that air of *laissez faire*, as of one who lays down the oars and deliberately lets the boat drift with the current. Was it only a momentary mood? Did he dare to say more?

She looked at the man, and she found him young and very much alive, fully aware and appreciative of her femininity.

Unconsciously she sighed.

In an instant he had thrown down the brushes and was at her side, a light in his eyes, a look on his face that made her shrink back a little and catch at the arms of the chair.

"Claudia!"

She raised her eyebrows interrogatively.

He had dropped on his knees beside her chair—he could do such things gracefully—and his lips were pressed on the back of her hand, on her wrist, on her soft forearm.

"Don't, Frank, I——"

"Claudia, I worship you" he said recklessly. "You must know it. Don't keep me at arm's length any longer. You are driving me mad by your coldness. I can't paint, I can't sleep.... I can only think of you as you might be if you would let yourself love me."

They had both risen to their feet, and he slipped his arm persuasively round her shoulders. His nearness seemed to deprive her of any will or any desire to repulse him. Love is sweet, and his evident sincerity and passion seemed to soothe some aching wound within her. Was not this what she needed to make her life tolerable? Every woman is entitled to love, and her marriage had been a mistake. Perhaps, if she had known all she knew now and she had met Frank earlier....

"Claudia, my dearest, say something to me."

He drew her unresistingly to him, and the lids drooped over her eyes as she felt the warmth of his breath on her face and then the pressure of his lips.

There was none of the fierce masculinity and violence of Gilbert's early love-making. Frank Hamilton was too much of an artist for that, and it was not the first time he had made love to a fastidious, sensitive woman. He gave her just the right impression, just the assurance she needed at that moment of tender affection and almost reverent passion. Had he been more virile in his love-making, memory would have awakened, and with her later knowledge she would have repulsed him. She would have said to herself, "This is passion, *only* passion, and I know what a little it means." Suspicion would have plucked at her sleeve. But Frank struck the right note, partly by instinct, partly by design.

When at last she made a faint resistance to the pressure of his arms, he slowly let her go, only to catch her hands and cover them again with kisses. She looked down at the waves of his dark hair, worn a little longer than is usual, but not noticeably "artistic," and she felt sure that she cared for him. He had given a grateful warmth to her heart. A glow of tenderness rose in her for him.

"I think you are foolish to care so much for me," she said softly.

He drew her hands up till they rested on his shoulders, and he smiled with happy contradiction into her face. He was very good-looking in his triumph, and she could not help rejoicing in his comeliness. The Greeks worshipped beauty, and were they so wrong? Youth and good looks ought to be part of love. Surely it is the ideal.

"Now you look as I knew you could look," he said half dreamily; "your eyes are soft and velvety like the

petals of the pansy. I must kiss them once again.... dear eyes....beautiful eyes....and I've looked into them such a long time, hoping to see them soften and glow as they do now. Claudia, if you knew how much I love you."

"I wonder why," she laughed, with the harmless coquetry of the woman who knows herself loved, "when there are such a number of women in the world."

"There isn't any woman comparable to you. I don't realize now that another woman exists on the face of the earth. I feel as if you and I were standing on a desert island. There are many people on the other islands, of course, but not on ours." He really meant it at the moment.

She pretended to laugh at his extravagance, but all the time she felt that this was the way a man should love a woman. Had she not felt like that when she had been in love with Gilbert? The world had consisted of Gilbert—and people. Of course, Frank loved her more than she did him, but that somehow evened up things a little. She had loved Gilbert more than he had loved her.

"Always I know how little severs me
From my heart's country...."

he murmured.

"Then I saw the tombstones in the dark and their message," she interrupted, the scene in the motor recurring to her.

"You saw——?"

"Nothing....only don't quote poetry; it makes everything seem so unreal."

"Unreal?" He caught her to him passionately. "Is this unreal? Don't you believe in my love?"

She let her head droop on his shoulder. "Men have such large hearts—or such small ones. Don't look so hurt, dear.... It's true. Men love and unlove so much more easily than women." But her lips smiled and took the sting out of her words. The lips said, "I want to be-

lieve," while the worldly, cynical words flowed over them. "What is fire to-day, Frank, is ashes to-morrow."

"You don't believe that love can last?"

His eyes shone, and he made a most convincing lover. His voice had the right ring. She could feel the pulsating warmth of his hand through the thin ninon of her sleeve. "Claudia, you mean everything to me—everything. I hardly dared to hope, and yet I had to, just as a shipwrecked sailor has to dream of land or he would die. I have worked hard because I wanted to be worthy of your praise, of your confidence. You have inspired everything I have done. All the time I have been striving to please *you*."

It was balm to her, it was food for her heart's hunger. He had worked hard at his profession but to please her, to lay his success as an offering at her feet—art, not for art's sake, but for love's. That was the right romantic spirit, a little *exalté*, a little extravagant; but then, he was an artist, and had not innumerable artists owed their lives' inspiration to women? She was glad she had been able to help him, to introduce him into a circle that had started the ball of success a-rolling for him. She had been able to give and he had appreciated the giving, for love always seeks self-immolation, and Claudia had nothing of the vampire in her composition. Love! Did she love him? Was it not inevitable after her first experience that she should be a little uncertain of her own feelings?

"I hoped, I prayed you would turn to me one day.... He doesn't appreciate you. He takes your beauty and your sweetness as his right. Everyone sees it."

She was a little startled. So she and Gilbert's marital relations were being discussed just like other couples' in their set. Gilbert's coldness and neglect were being talked about over the teacups of Mayfair. Her pride revolted against it, and her half-formed determination to

console herself like the other women she knew hardened. Something that had been pricking her a little ceased to do so. She would take the sweets offered her. After all, life soon ended—in a tombstone. An epigram she had heard a few days previously recurred to her mind: "Let every woman see to it that she has a present, so that the future may not find her unprovided with a past." Who cared about either her morals or her ethics? She had only herself to reckon with. *Herself!* Well, she would consider that another time.

"We won't discuss him.... Never. You understand, Frank?"

He had read the sudden tumult of her thoughts.

"You are still in love with him?" he said jealously. "Of course, I know a woman like you must have married for love. Tell me—you must answer me this one question, then I will respect your wishes.... Are you?"

She did not hesitate, but she made a deliberate pause, as though she were finally settling the question with her own heart.

"No, I no longer love him, because the man I loved does not exist.... Now go on with the picture. The light will soon go, and I want to see it finished. Please."

Reluctantly he went back to the easel and took up his palette. She stood on the platform, watching him. He caught her look and squared his shoulders.

"This is going to be my best picture," he said enthusiastically. "Love and beauty! Why, the very worst artist would be inspired. I know I can do big things if you encourage me." He stopped, and then came back to where she stood. "Claudia, you never acknowledged you loved me. Say you do, dearest?"

His eyes were very beseeching and like a child's, a little distressed at the doubt that had flung its shadows across his happiness.

"Claudia, you do love me?"

"I—I think I do, Frank. No, you must be content with that at present." She waved him back.

"But some day you will love me as I love you." His eyes were steady now, and the accent of the voice was that of the conquering male.

She laughed a little uncertainly and a faint flush rose to her cheeks.

"Shall I? Oh, what conceited creatures men are! And—I don't know how much you love me. A woman never knows. Now go on with the portrait."

As she went down in the lift some time later it stopped at the second floor, and to her surprise the gate admitted Colin Paton.

"You!" he exclaimed pleasantly. "And what are you doing in Victoria Street?"

For a moment she had an unpleasant feeling of having been caught doing something clandestine, and her reply was a little embarrassed. She never remembered to have felt quite so before.

"Didn't you know that Mr. Hamilton's studio is up at the top? The portrait, you know."

She was very annoyed with herself for the feeling, and went on quickly:

"It was you who begged me to continue the sittings. So I have been trying to please you. But it's very tiresome."

She wondered what made her tack on the last sentence even as she uttered it. Was it because she feared that his keen eyes would note her embarrassment? Why did she have to be a hypocrite? She was glad when the lift stopped and the bright electric light ceased to shine on her face. The street was grey and more kindly.

"Beauty must be penalized some way or another," he rejoined smilingly. "Some women would be only too glad to put up with the boredom should a well-known portrait-painter beg them to sit."

She arranged her veil and looked round for her motor.

"You don't know his work, do you?"

The fresh air of the street was refreshing after the enervating atmosphere of the studio.

"I saw some of his pictures the other day at a show. It's clever work."

"Not more than that?" Her tone implied that his praise was too tepid.

"Does it quite satisfy you?"

She was feeling vaguely irritated at the encounter. Why did he make her feel uncomfortable, and why did he belittle Frank's work? He was usually generous in his praise. Had he any suspicion with regard to their friendship? She answered untruthfully, with a touch of defiance:

"Yes, I think it quite satisfies me."

"Well, you're a good judge. Perhaps I've lost my taste for pictures in the Argentine. Big spaces are apt to make you rather intolerant of some so-called 'artistic' achievements. Genius always stands out, but talent somehow gets awfully dwarfed. Don't you know what I mean?"

"Well, we're not in the Argentine. We're in Victoria Street." No, she would not admit that Frank had only talent.

He laughed and dropped the subject. "I know it well by the roar of the buses. I met a fellow out there who was desperately homesick, and he confided to me that he'd give anything to see the scavengers washing down the street as he drove home from the club, and see the wet pavement shining under the street lamps. How's Gilbert to-day?"

"He has gone to his chambers."

"What? Why, he was in bed yesterday."

"I know." She shrugged her shoulders under their luxurious furs. "But the only thing that counts with

Gilbert is his work, you know. He refuses to stop in bed any longer." She looked him straight in the face and her eyes were bright and hard. "Tell me something. Did you always know that work is the only real thing in Gilbert's life? But, of course, you knew. You see most things in your quiet, undemonstrative way."

They were standing beside the car. The door was open for her to step into it.

For a moment he was nonplussed. What answer could he make to such a question? But while he was groping for some words, she held out her hand with a little amused, cynical laugh.

"Yes. I see you did know. You need not tell a lie. I think you might have warned me. Good-bye."

She left him standing on the pavement, his grey eyes troubled and anxious.

She leaned back and tried to think of Frank and the difference his love was going to make in her life. She tried to give herself up again to the pleasant feeling of being cared for, of being appreciated. She tried to recapture the thrill his caresses had given her; but she could not. She could only see the troubled grey eyes of Colin Paton.

"He's spoilt my afternoon," she said angrily to herself as the car sped homewards. "He's spoilt my afternoon. And he is only a dreamer. He has no right to judge me."

But Colin Paton was not the judge.

CHAPTER IX

"MELTON GREEN"

SHE'S so keen on your coming," urged Jack. "She's taken a tremendous fancy to you. And, you know, she's such a kid. She's no end proud of her turn. You *must* come and see her."

"You are aware that my august husband will be very displeased should he hear of it," returned Claudia dryly.

"Oh! blow Gilbert and his airs! I can't think how you came to marry such a sack of sawdust. I met him yesterday and he was as frigid as a frozen leg of mutton. What's it got to do with him whom I marry?"

A good constitution will stand a great deal, and, contrary to expectations, Gilbert had not had to return ignominiously to bed after his rash defiance of the doctor's orders. But he had never recovered, and Claudia saw that he was not half the man he had been. But he would not admit that he felt ill, and his secret feelings only showed themselves in great irritability and an almost total ignoring of her presence.

"If people minded their own business," said Claudia lightly, "this world would be a dull place! It's family friction that keeps us all alive!"

"Rot! But Gilbert is too priggish for words. I always did hate the Curreys, anyway, and Gilbert was ever a

cold-blooded fish." He cast a curious glance at his sister, which she ignored. Sometimes in a dull, unimaginative way he wondered how far emotion now played its part in her marriage. But he never asked questions, for he was a little afraid of Claudia. "I say, come along to-night. It's Saturday, and that's a good night. You've never seen anything like the Empire at Melton Green on a Saturday, I bet."

"I half promised to make a four at the club," said Claudia indifferently, stroking Billie's ears. "But Melton Green sounds amusing."

Gilbert had gone down for the week-end to his parents, always a tiresome function to her, and this time he had not urged her to accompany him.

"That's nothing. I insist on your coming. We'll dash back to the West End between the shows and get something to eat. Do, Claud, old girl; I want you to see how popular she is. Why, the gallery boys fairly eat her."

"How much is the gallery?"

"Oh! threepence admission." Jack grinned. "They are a crew, too. They'll amuse you. You look a bit down in the mouth. Fay'll cheer you up. You can't be blue with her."

"I'm not down in the mouth," contradicted his sister untruthfully. "One can't always be howling with laughter. Life isn't as funny as all that."

"Oh! I don't know. That's the worst of you brainy people. You take life too seriously. What on earth is the good of rootling about and trying to find a deep meaning in everything? There isn't any meaning in life. You're just put here to enjoy yourself. A cabbage doesn't think. Why should we?"

"Yes, I know your theory of life, or rather, your lack of one." Frank had been insinuating the same philosophy at their various meetings. She was aware that the insinuating process had an ulterior motive, for she was

unable to deceive herself or walk blindly into the arms he held out to her. But so far she had kept him off very delicate ground. She knew she could not do so much longer, and she wondered at herself that she did not capitulate. For more and more her thoughts dwelt on those pleasures of which she had been deprived. The spring air tantalized her and made the blood run hotter in her veins. Nature craved its proper food; youth seconded its demands.

"Chuck this analytical business and take life lightly," urged her brother. "I take life lightly and so does Fay. She's a perfect skylark. Doesn't look a day ahead or a day backwards."

"And you counsel me to do likewise—to emulate her mode of living?"

He was lounging in the library of her flat, content with himself and all the world. He had borne a lot of "chipping" on his marriage, which was now dying down. But in spite of his lethargic egotism, he caught a look now in Claudia's eyes that made his dull brain work a little. What had some woman been saying about Claudia and some painter chap? He tried to recall the gossip, but it had been late at night and his recollection was vague.

"In moderation, old girl," he counselled warily. "Of course there are some things you can't do. But flutter a bit if you like."

"What sort of things can't I do?" asked Claudia, with abrupt directness.

"Oh, don't peg me down! Well, things I can do, you can't. A girl's different from a man—at least, you are."

"The old shibboleth!" she jeered. "We're not different, my dear brother. We're exactly the same, only—only I suppose we're more fastidious."

He was a little alarmed. In the old days Claudia had always taken what he called "a high moral tone" in

discussing his little peccadilloes. Vaguely he felt that this change in her was not right.

"Is Fay conservative in her opinions on this subject?" went on Claudia, with a touch of cruelty. "Does she think there are things she can do and you can't?"

He winced and uncrossed his legs. "She's different from you," he said decidedly. "You're sort of—well, superior. I'd hate to think——" He stopped and tweaked Billie's ear.

"Well, go on. What would you hate?"

Billie looked at him sadly as he twisted his lips about. "Well, er—oh! you know the things I wouldn't like you to do. For some women it's all right, not for you. You see, well, with some women it doesn't seem to matter, it's natural for them to do a bit of straying, but it's not natural for you, and"—with unexpected acuteness—"it would make you miserable. You'd hate the game, because you'd see through the whole bally business, and you'd criticize yourself and him."

"You're talking of a mere flirtation," returned Claudia quickly. "A liaison between a man and a woman may be something more than that. What, after all, is a gold band on the finger and a mumbling clergyman?"

"Course, if you put it that way, I can't answer you. But I don't say it's different, only—well, they nearly all are flirtations of varying degrees of warmth. You don't mean much to her, and she doesn't mean much to you, but you pretend all the time. Of course"—vaguely—"there are *grandes passions*, like Shakespeare's people, but they don't grow on every gooseberry-bush. And I ought to know, you know." He made the last remark quite simply, just as he might have complimented himself on his taste in ties.

"You haven't looked for love," she said sharply. "Love may come at any moment in your life, and I think you deny it—at your own risk."

"Besides, Gilbert would make a hell of a row," observed her brother. "A hell of a row."

"I wasn't talking of myself. We were merely arguing in—in a general way."

He looked at her in silence, and she turned away, biting her lip. Then she rose with a little dry laugh. The one man of all those she knew whose tolerance she would have taken for granted had failed to back her up. Why should she be different from other neglected wives? Why should she go through life hungry and miserable? Suddenly she turned in surprise at Jack's next remark.

"Why doesn't Colin Paton get married? He's a nice chap. Everyone speaks well of him."

"Colin? Oh! I don't think he cares for women that way."

Jack gave a lazy chuckle. "All men care for women that way—when they can get 'em. Why didn't you marry him Claud? Why did you give him the go-by?"

"The go-by?" she said incredulously. "Why, he never wanted to marry me. We were only—friends, the best of friends."

"I read somewhere in something that friendship is a good foundation for marriage. What was the beastly quotation? 'Love is friendship set on fire.' It impressed me, because Fay and I were awful good chums for a long time and we never—never till we were married."

He said it in a shamefaced way, like a schoolboy convicted of saying his prayers. His face had gone a curious pink, and he avoided meeting Claudia's eyes.

But she was not thinking of his confession, she was thinking of Colin Paton. Why had he not married? Was her easy explanation the right one? Why, no, he had never wanted to marry her.

"You don't imagine Colin Paton wanted to marry me, do you?" she asked.

"Well, I shouldn't have been surprised if you and he had fixed it up. You used to go about a lot together, and you're not a woman a man would feel platonically about. I thought he went away so hurriedly because of your engagement. But, of course, you know him much better than I."

She found the thought curiously interesting and a little exciting, even while she tried to dismiss it. He had never said a word that could be construed into love-making. Surely there would have been some word or look that would have betrayed him if it were as Jack suggested.

Jack looked at his watch. "By Jove, we must go if we're going. Come along, old girl, she's on in the first house at eight, and it's a long drive down there. It's the wilds of beyond, over the river. Go and put on something quiet and oldish. There's a good deal of dust knocking about behind the scenes."

The drive was, as he had said, a long one, through narrow streets and past huge lumbering tramcars that were new to Claudia. The streets during the latter part of the journey were lined with roadside stalls illuminated by flaring naphtha lamps that cast weird shadows over faces that reminded her of those in Dickens' novels. There were barrows with all kinds of china, stalls brilliantly red with joints of meat, others piled high with greenstuff and with trays of toffee and sweets. It seemed to Claudia that she had never heard so many hoarse, raucous voices before, punctuated every now and then by the pipe of some child trying to make itself heard among the tumult. Between the activities of the stalls they passed rows of grey, grimy little houses, timber-yards and factories, brightly-lit public houses, and always the trams, still more brilliant, gliding along full of passengers, like great ships in full sail.

She and Jack did not talk intimately any more. She

listened to his account of a big golfing competition. Only once did he revert to their previous conversation. It came up apropos of Jack saying that Colin Paton had been in up to the last round.

"He plays such a good, steady game. Upon my word, I like to watch him. I say, Claudia, if it were he, instead of this painter chap, I wouldn't mind. But, then, he's Gilbert's friend, isn't he?"

Claudia was spared any reply by the stoppage of their car outside a brightly-lit theatre with placards galore. She noticed at once several of The Girlie Girl in various costumes and various smiles. It was not one of the new suburban halls, but there was plenty of light on the frontage.

"Got to find the stage-door," said Jack. "Here, perhaps this is it, up this alley."

The alley was dark and very dirty and Claudia held up her skirts fastidiously. A boy, with a jug in his hand, came running down while they were half-way, and a man with a clay pipe came out of a grimy, narrow door at the end.

It was the stage-door. Claudia almost shrank back when she saw the narrow passage way with its blackened walls and filthy staircase, which she found she was expected to descend. The atmosphere was indescribable, frowsy, hot and stale. The strains of the orchestra reached them intermittently as the doors below were opened and shut.

"You'll find her down there," called out the door-keeper encouragingly. "She ain't on yet."

The boy had returned with the beer-jug, and the beer was being slopped on the stairs as he shoved his way past them. A curious roaring sound was in progress now, and it took Claudia a little time to realize that it was applause from the front of the house.

She followed Jack down the stairs, and she saw that

the dirtiness of his surroundings did not embarrass him. Evidently he was used to them. The steps were of stone and the railings were iron, and it seemed to Claudia like some curious sort of dirty prison, rather than a hall of gaiety.

They arrived at the bottom of the stairs, and looking up from the stone steps on which she was afraid her feet might slip, she got rather a shock. Standing talking excitedly were three acrobats with the minimum of clothing, the perspiration pouring down over their make-up. It was certainly Nature in the raw, and hardly a pleasant sight at close quarters. The muscles were standing out on their arms and chests, and for the first time Claudia realized the work involved in such performances, which she usually sat through indifferently. One of them hailed Jack enthusiastically.

"Hallo! old man! Fay was asking if we'd seen you." They cast a curious but not very interested glance at Claudia. "Come into our room and have a drink later on."

Jack nodded, and Claudia followed him along another few yards of the passage. It struck her that most of the dirt had been made by human fingers and bodies, for above the height of five feet or so the walls were comparatively clean. They passed an open door where a stout woman in chemise and petticoat was making-up in a public manner before a looking-glass, and then she found herself in Fay's dressing-room.

It was a small slip of a room, with flaring gas-jets protected by wire shades and two washing-basins inset in the table-shelf which went across one side of it. The heat in the room took Claudia's breath away; it was even worse than the passages. The light was almost cruelly bright. There were three huge dress-baskets, which almost filled the apartment, and a lumpy, perspiring and heavily-breathing dresser was sitting on one of them, sewing on something spangled.

A man was just finishing speaking in a heavy, oily voice as Fay's husband pushed open the door, and Claudia was in time to hear Fay say, in accents of excitement and pleasure: "Jim, you're a perfect duck. I love diamonds and rubies. Come here and let me give you another kiss for it."

So it happened that Claudia's second view of Fay was one with her arms flung round something maculine, standing on the tips of her toes to do so. Two brawny arms were returning her hug. She felt Jack stiffen a little as Fay broke loose with a laugh.

"It's almost like old times. Oh! but I mustn't remember them now. I promised.... Here he is. Jack, come in. I want to introduce you to Jim Clerry—my husband."

There was not the faintest touch of confusion in Fay's manner or face, any more than with a child who has been caught bestowing embraces. She was evidently very pleased over something. She was radiant with good humour.

The man, who thrust out his hand and said, "Glad to know you sir," was, in spite of his name, an obvious Jew, with heavy, coarse features and almost negroid lips. The face was only redeemed by the brightness of the dark eyes. To Claudia's artistic sense it was almost revolting that any pretty woman should kiss him, especially anything so dainty as Fay. She wondered, indeed, that any woman could wish to do so.

In an artificial way, for she was heavily made-up, Fay was looking her prettiest. Her great blue eyes sparkled under the bunch of pale blue ostrich feathers on her head which, with some kind of a gold-lace cap, constituted her head-dress.

"Now, boys, I want you to be friends," called out Fay, picking up a hare's foot and giving another rub to her red cheeks. "I say, what's the time? Have the

performing dogs finished? Oh! Jack, why didn't you tell me?" She rushed over impetuously to the doorway and pulled Claudia in. "My dear, this is nice of you. I *am* glad to see you. Sit on this basket. But I wish you hadn't come to this hall. I generally do much more classy halls than this, but I have to do this on an old contract. I'm working 'em all off now. I wish I were doing 'The Monkey and the Moth' to-night. Have you heard it? No? Oh! it's a ripping song. Perhaps I'll do it at the second house. Oh! I'm forgetting my manners—never shall be a real lady—Mr. Clerry, Mrs. Currey, my sister-in-law. Isn't she lovely?"

A knotted, hairy and none too clean hand came towards her and shook hers like a pump-handle.

"Good looks run in the family, I should say," with what, to Claudia, was an offensive chuckle. "Well, I'll 'op it, Fay. No room for an old mash now. Congrats on your marriage. I daresay you were wise to chuck me. Anyway, I bear no grudge. So long. Ta-ta, everyone."

"Jim, don't be a fool!" cried Fay, standing on one foot like a stork while the dresser laced some ribbons round her leg. "You must wait and see my turn."

"Got to see a man at the Kilburn Empire. Only came along to give you that toy. Ta-ta. Be good, and you'll be happy."

With a comprehensive nod he went out, with a curious swaggering, swaying movement of the shoulders and hips.

"Come and see us at the flat," shouted Fay, standing on the other leg. Then to Claudia: "He's the best clog dancer on the Moss and Stoll tour. He's out this week because of the fire last week."

A jeweller's morocco case lay at her elbow, and Jack looked at it suspiciously.

"What's that, Fay?"

She opened it with great glee. "The duckiest pendant you ever saw." It was a showy but rather expensive

affair. "It's jolly nice of Jim under the circs. I'll wear it to-night for luck."

Jack took the case away from her. "Fay, you can't accept this. You're my wife now. Don't you see it isn't—isn't the thing. I'll give you all the pendants you want."

The blue eyes opened at first in surprise and then grew dark and stormy. Her mouth took a curve that spoilt its prettiness.

"Give it back to me at once or you and me'll have a row. Why, they're real diamonds and rubies. He told me he paid twenty-five quid for it wholesale. Think you're going to chuck it in the dust-bin?" Her voice had grown a little shrill. Claudia wished she were anywhere rather than in the same room, but the dresser looked on with frank interest, "a bit of a row" evidently enlivening her profession for her.

"I shan't chuck it in the dust-bin," said Jack a little sulkily. "You've got to send it back to him. She must, mustn't she, Claudia?"

"Not much, my dear. And have him give it to some other girl? After all, I've a right to it. We were great pals. I hear he's taken up with Molly Billington, and I won't see it hung round her fat neck. She's a beast! Why shouldn't he give me a wedding-present?"

She made a sudden snatch that reminded Claudia of a velvet-pawed cat, and regained possession of it. With a laugh of triumph she put it round her neck.

"I'll wear it to-night for luck." Her good temper had come back. She danced up to her husband, who was standing moodily regarding the mess of make-up materials spread on a towel, and held up her lips to him.

"Don't be a loony, Jackie boy. It's all over and done with if you're feeling jealous. I'm good now. I won't take anything more from him. Kiss me." Yelps and howls suddenly assailed their ears. "There! the dogs

have finished. Kiss me like a good boy and I'll forgive you." She looked up into his face with a delicious *moue* and wink. "I never said any of your girls were not to give you presents, though I'd fire them out of the flat quick enough. I say 'Live and let live.' Come on."

The tempting mouth and laughing eyes were too much for Jack, and he did as she requested, though with a rueful look at Claudia that she thought it better to pretend not to see.

"Hope my voice is all right to-night. I ate a lot of bloater-paste for tea, and that dries up the voice. Don't you find that? Only it's a weakness of mine. Mar used to say I was weaned on bloater-paste." She looked in the glass anxiously. "Perkins, a wee drop of stout. La—la—la—la!" She took the scale with terrific force in the small space. "Come in." This in answer to a knock at the door. The fat woman whom they had seen next door came hurtling in. Her toilette was a little more advanced, but not much.

"I say, dearie, have you heard about Gertie Lockhart? She's got the rheumatic fever, and they say she won't be able to work for months. We're getting up a little sub. for her. Give me a few bob, my dear."

"I should think so," said Fay emphatically. "Perkins, find my purse. I heard she was pretty bad. Rotten luck! Here's half a quid with my love. Oh! Miss Belle de Laney—Mrs. Currey. You've met my husband, haven't you?"

"Charmed to meet you, I'm sure. Fay, where did you get them feathers? I've been looking out for some like that for weeks. I've got such a cold I can hardly speak. Old Moser's a bit screwed to-night, ain't he? Thanks muchly, old girl. My! I wish I could keep my fat down like you. Once upon a time—yes, it sounds like a fairy-tale, don't it?—I had legs like hers. Couldn't fill my stockings out properly. Now it's out-sizes, and the holes

"I wear in 'em!" She nodded confidentially to Claudia. "Do you know, I used to play Columbine once; then I got to principal boy, and now—well, look at me!"

"Don't you worry," said Fay kindly. "You've got a fine figure, and no one'll overlook you. And your song's a treat, a fair treat. Got three curtains last night, didn't you?"

"Yes. Glad you like it. There's a rattling good 'ouse to-night. See you later, Fay."

"Used to be one of the prettiest girls on the halls," explained Fay, as Miss Belle de Laney vanished; "used to know my mother. She's a good sort, too. Husband's a swine, and won't do no work, and she keeps him and four kids, and makes no growl about it either. Now, Jack, I'm on in a few minutes. Take your sister round to the front. Old Moser'll put you in a box....la, la, la, la.... H'm!.... How do I look? Knock 'em in the Old Kent Roadish? Emerald green and orange, my own idea. Got it from seeing some oranges lying with the spinach in the kitchen. Bit of shick, ain't it? See the saucy garters?" She suddenly bestowed a hug upon Claudia. "I like you no end. I watched you just now, and you didn't turn up your nose at Belle. Of course, she's as common as dirt, I know that. Still, I believe in good hearts. We're going to be real sisters, aren't we? You can teach me the ways of high society, because I don't want the boy to be ashamed of me. I'll catch on quick enough if you'll only give me a few tips, and I can keep my mouth shut if I want to." She turned with a characteristically quick gesture—she reminded Claudia of an active robin—and caught Jack by the lapels of his coat.

"You're not angry with me, Jumbo, are you? What does it matter?"

"I'm not exactly angry," said Jack, looking into her face, "only, don't you see, things are different now, and

a—a man—can't give jewellery—to a lady who is—is the wife of another man."

She raised her eyebrows. "Moses in the bulrushes! why not? Most women would like to get the chance of having pendants. It's a souvenny, Jack, for luck. And it's so pretty. I'm straight now all right, so it don't mean nothing. Crikey! that's his second song. I must go down. Perkins, give me my coat. Here"—she rushed back again to the table and thrust a bunch of carnations into Claudia's hand—"throw these down to me. It looks well. See you afterwards."

CHAPTER X

"THE STAR TURN"

CLAUDIA had never been behind the scenes of a theatre, and she found the *va et vient*, the bustle and hurry of a music-hall almost bewildering, so that she received the vaguest impressions of her journey through to the front. She felt, rather than saw, the gloomy floor space behind the set littered with properties, all looking very ludicrous and childish. A man was evidently doing a song and patter turn to judge from the guffaws from the front of the house. She could see above her head men up in the flies controlling the limelight and the curtain, all of whom were in their shirt-sleeves. In fact, Jack was the only conventionally dressed person she had seen since she entered the theatre.

She was hurried along to a small door, which she found gave access to the house—Jack was evidently known to the man in charge, who nodded familiarly and called him "Captin'"—and having descended some dusty, red-covered steps, she found herself suddenly in a little box in full view of the audience. Her first impression was that she had never seen so many people so tightly squeezed together before, and so intent on the comedian with the red nose and battered silk hat who was holding forth

from the middle of the stage. All the theatres she had ever seen had been more or less roomy, but these people reminded her of an old-fashioned solid bouquet, except that there was practically no colour in the house. In a West-End theatre various bits of colour strike the eye, especially in the stalls and dress-circle; but as the curtain descended to great applause she saw that the house was a study in black and white—the clothing black, the faces white. There must have been some bits of colour, but they did not show. Her second impression was that she had never before realized how toiling humanity in a mass can smell. It was the odour of toil and scanty bathing, mingled with the inevitable orange and the reek of gas.

A number went up in the slot at the side—twelve—the star turn of the evening, *The Girlie Girl*.

The orchestra struck up one of her popular songs, and the audience, and especially the gallery boys—they looked to Claudia as though they were hanging on the ceiling by their eyelashes like flies—began to cheer and beat time to the music. She happened to glance at Jack, and she was amused to see a complacent smile taking the place of the dumbly-worried look he had been wearing since the episode of the pendant.

"They adore her," he whispered. "She believes in making friends with the gallery boys. She says it's the secret of her success.... I say, Claud, what could I do about that beastly pendant? She doesn't see things as we do. She's like a blessed babe, or a savage, in some things."

A huge burst of cheering stopped any further conversation, and Claudia found herself looking down at her sister-in-law laughing and kissing her hands to the gallery. In the limelight she looked extraordinarily pretty and alive, and there was no man present that could have failed to see the *gamine* charm of her, though he might not have wanted to espouse her. Her blue eyes laughed

in a friendly fashion at the house and her pretty feet began to dance to the measure while she waved aloft a sort of d'Orsay walking-stick tied up with green and orange ribbons.

Her voice, though sweet—unusually sweet for the music-halls—was nothing wonderful, and Claudia detected already signs of hard wear. She had a few particularly good notes in her top register, but it was not for her voice that she was so applauded. There was an air of infectious gaiety, a "I-like-you-and-you-like-me" camaraderie that made the vapid song and words—how incredibly bad the words were!—seem amusing.

The song was all about a ladybird and a rose in an old-fashioned garden. The rose was sweet and innocent, and the ladybird "knew a bit." It was neither funny nor frankly improper; but the audience roared with laughter, especially when she completed each verse with a huge wink. At the end of the song she threw a kiss deliberately up to their box, which made the entire audience turn and look at them, and reduced Claudia to a state of helpless and fiery embarrassment.

"All right, boys, it's my husband," called out the Girlie Girl, with a chuckle, as she departed into the wings. There followed a burst of yelling, cat-calling and clapping, with cries of "Good luck!" "Send us a bit of cake, Girlie," "Keep him in order," "Wish you joy!"

Claudia was sorry she had not put on a veil or a more shady hat. She knew that her face was scarlet. She had never been in such a scene in her life, and she took no pleasure in being conspicuous at any time. Jack was looking sheepish, but evidently he was more used to such things.

The audience went on singing the chorus of her last song while Fay was changing in the wings. Then the orchestra struck up another tune as she appeared in a smart little *vivandière* costume of blue, with red facings,

and a cap that was stuck coquettishly sideways on her hugh bunch of curls. This time she led the singing of the chorus from the stage, every now and then ceasing to sing herself, and beating time with encouraging gestures to the rather hoarse, flat voices of the crowd. It was a wonderful sight to Claudia, who was so fascinated that she forgot her embarrassment and leaned forward. As she looked round the house all the lips seemed moving—men and women, boys and children.

The audience would not part with her, and after taking eight curtains she came back to sing the last verse once more.

"Now boys, I want you to sing *loudly* this time. Let's raise the roof and take the slates off. Shan't be coming to Milton Green for a long time. Don't whisper—*sing*. All of you sing, Tom and Bill, and Kate and Mary. Sing out as you would if you got your wages doubled to-morrow. Now...."

"I'm one of the King's little drummer-boys,
And I serve...."

The packed audience positively yelled, and Fay laughing, kept on encouraging them with remarks:

"Go it, boys!.... It's a cure for sore throats.... Get it off your chests.... Bill, you're not opening your mouth wide enough; no flies to-night.... Mary, a bit louder...."

Then how the tragedy happened no one ever quite understood. Fay was laughing and kissing her little hands up to the gallery, as alive as a piece of quicksilver, when the heavy curtain came down suddenly, and before anyone could shout, struck her. Claudia, who had risen in horror, caught a look of almost childish surprise in the blue eyes before Fay lay flattened out on the ground the two pretty arms thrown out helplessly in front of her, the curtain, as it were, cutting her in two.

For a moment there was a horrible awed hush; then a woman in the audience gave vent to a piercing shriek, and immediately a tumult of cries and shouts filled the auditorium. Claudia, who had been almost stunned by the suddenness of the thing, had just time to see the men fighting their way to the front, apparently with some vague idea of raising the curtain off the little body, when she saw the curtain move up a few inches and half a dozen hands gently drag the body behind it. She turned to Jack. He was staring down at the stage, his face ashen grey, his eyes starting out of his head. But he made no movement to go to his wife.

"Jack," she panted, "we must go round. Quick! Don't you want to get to her."

Still he did not move, nor did he seem to hear her. He was still staring down at the stage.

"Jack!" she shook his arm. "Rouse yourself! Come quick!"

He seemed to awaken with a shudder, and she drew him into the shadow of the box.

"I can't," he said, with dry lips and shaking from head to foot. "I can't.... Is she dead?"

Claudia was unaware of the great weight of the curtain, and tried to speak encouragingly.

"No, no, of course not.... Jack, you must go to her."

"I can't stand things like that," he whispered, passing his hand over his clammy forehead. "You know I never could.... Oh, my God! she's dead! Fay's dead, and I saw her killed!"

Claudia remembered that he never could stand ugly sights or any kind of illness or decay. His ordinary good-nature entirely deserted him at such times. He had refused to go and see an old schoolfellow in his last illness, and had always tried to escape visiting his grandmother, who had died slowly of cancer.

"Jack, you *must*!" cried Claudia hotly, propelling him

to the door. "Don't be a coward. Perhaps she's only stunned and wants you. You've got to play the man, or I'll never speak to you again."

Even the biting contempt in her voice did not rouse him; but he allowed himself to be dragged like one in a dream through the door and up the red stairs.

"For the sake of your manhood and the honour of the Iversons, if not for poor Fay, pull yourself together," said Claudia sharply, as they stepped upon the stage.

A group of men were bending down over something that had been laid on a pile of coats. Others were crowding together, talking in excited, frightened whispers. The stout lady came rushing on the stage, sobbing hysterically and wringing her red hands. The orchestra commenced to play again.

A man came pushing his way after them through the door from the auditorium. Accustomed as she was to the conventional garb of West End physicians, Claudia was surprised to hear this man in a pepper-and-salt suit say: "I'm a doctor. Let me go to her."

Jack was still dazed. With a last glance of contempt at him, Claudia went forward and took command of the situation. "Please, doctor, do all you can. I am her sister-in-law. Tell me what we should do."

She followed him towards the little group, inwardly shrinking and desperately frightened, but outwardly calm and collected. She stood with the stage hands, as one of them. She could see by their faces that they feared a bad verdict.

Various hoarse whispers reached her while she waited, feeling as though the world had suddenly turned topsy-turvy.

".... The next turn....can't go on.... Let the orchestra play.... Tell the audience she isn't badly hurtturned my blood cold.... Hadn't time to shout Who dropped the damned thing?.... Must have

broken her spine.... Rather anyone than The Girlie Girl."

The doctor had risen from his examination and was coming towards her. She nerved herself for a shock; but she could hear her own heart thumping against her ribs.

"Not—not——" She could not get the words out of her dry lips.

The doctor gravely shook his head. "No, she's alive. Bad injury to the spine, I should say. Get her to a hospital"—then taking in the quality of the woman who had said she was the sister-in-law—"or to her home at once and call in a specialist."

Claudia read the look in his eyes, which was compounded of pity and deep emotion. She had seen that look once in the eyes of a man who had been entrusted with the task of breaking the news of her husband's death to a poor woman on their country estate.

"Is she—very bad?" she whispered. "Will she die?"

"I'm afraid not—yet."

Claudia reeled up against a piece of scenery. She never forgot that moment. The orchestra playing a rag-time melody, the stout woman sobbing, the regret in the eyes of the doctor.

"You mean——"

"It's not likely she will ever move off her bed again. She's paralysed."

CHAPTER XI

"OUT AT SEA"

SUCH confusion as existed in Fay's flat that night Claudia had never conceived possibly. Life in Circe's household had been somewhat erratic occasionally, but there had been a sort of order in the disorder, and a certain peaceful current had always flowed over internal convulsions. But in Fay's home everything in the way of discipline and order—if there ever were any—fell to pieces when she was carried home unconscious. The two domestics wailed and sobbed—Polly at first went into hysterics, and had to have cold water thrown over her—the telephone bell went incessantly, and almost before Fay had been put to bed by Claudia, newspaper reporters filled the hall with insistent inquiries.

Claudia, though she kept her head pretty well and controlled the panic in her heart, had always been accustomed to have competent underlings to do things for her, and she did not know what ought to be done in such a crisis, what specialist should be fetched, and where to obtain a nurse at a minute's notice.

It was Colin Paton who came to the rescue in answer to her telephone inquiries, and reduced order out of chaos.

Directly she saw him walk into the hall Claudia felt a sense of instant relief. In a few minutes the reporters had all gone, the telephone-bell rang no more, and the specialist and nurse were on their way. No one seemed surprised that he should take command, the servants obeyed him without a query. He seemed to have an almost mesmeric calming effect on everyone.

"Where's your brother?" he asked, as soon as he had a moment to spare for essentials.

"He's shut himself in the dining-room." She told him of his attitude.

"It's partly physical, just as some men—the bravest—cannot stand the sight of blood. But I must talk to him.... Claudia, you are dead tired. There's nothing more to be done at the moment. She's still unconscious." The clock in the room struck eleven, and she dropped wearily into a chair. His keen eyes suddenly took on a tenderness that she did not see as they searched her drawn face. "Have you had a meal this evening?"

She shook her head without raising her eyes, for she suddenly felt a weak sort of feeling, so that she was afraid if she looked up and met his gaze the tears would come running down her cheeks. He would despise her for such an exhibition, but everything—everything seemed so wrong and miserable.

"Then you'll have one at once.... Yes, I know you feel as if you can't eat, but you must." He put his hand on her shoulder, and there was something so sympathetic and yet so invigorating in his touch that she felt new courage flow into her veins. She did not know that the sight of two tears that would escape down her cheeks ere she could overcome her weakness nearly unnerved him, and made the cheap tawdry little room suddenly blur before his eyes.

What he said to Jack, Claudia never knew, but ten minutes later Jack came out of the dining-room looking

like a whipped cur, but holding his head with a certain forced rigidity, and his lips were steady as he said to her:

"Claudia, is there anything I can do? I've been a beast, I know. Shall I"—he could not control a wince of repugnance—"shall I go to her?"

She told him that she was still unconscious. "But when she recovers, if she asks for you, you must go to her."

"Yes, I will, I will. Only, Claud, for God's sake don't go away and leave us to-night. I couldn't stand that."

Claudia looked at Paton inquiringly. Everyone seemed to be doing that to-night. There was a slight pinkness of her eyes, and somehow, to Paton, it gave her a new and rather pathetic character. The dark eyes were very heavy but curiously beautiful in the white face, and the hard brilliancy that had characterized them recently had temporarily vanished.

"I'll stay, too, if you wish," said Paton simply, "but in case she recovers consciousness she might like to see a woman she knows as well as her nurse. A woman is always such a comfort to another in time of illness, don't you think?"

"I hardly know," admitted Claudia, trying to force some soup down her throat, "you see, I've never been in contact with such things as—grave illnesses. Of course I'll stay."

The specialist had arrived by this time, and Paton left the brother and sister together. Claudia tried to comfort him as she would have a child.

"I don't mean to be heartless," blubbered Jack, his face working pitifully, "only you don't know how I feel. I do love her. I'm sorry I was so cross about the pendant. She put it on for *luck*. Oh, God!"

It struck Claudia what a ridiculously immature couple

Fay and Jack were. They were small ships that should have kept near shore, and now Destiny had blown them suddenly out to sea. And she herself was tacking about in the wind, blown this way and that, and finding no place where she might safely anchor. Somewhere at the back of her mind she knew Frank Hamilton was no permanent anchorage for any woman. Surely, the children of Circe were not the luckiest of mortals!

It seemed ages before Paton came back to them. Jack was drinking himself into a fuddled state, and Claudia was too anxious herself to keep watch over him. Afterwards she realized that she could have written an inventory of that commonplace room.

His face told them that he had no good news before he spoke.

"Tell us the worst," said Jack thickly, "always better to know everything."

"The medical verdict is paraplegia. Fatal injury to the nerves at the base of the spine.... She's coming round now. She can't feel any pain, that's one blessing, poor child."

"That means—she is paralysed?" whispered Claudia.

"From the waist downwards....she may live for some time. I think, Claudia, it would be kind of you to go to her. The strange nurse might frighten her. I don't think we ought—to tell her there's no hope. The doctor says it is always better in such cases to let the patient think she will recover. Keeps the mind from dwelling on the inevitable. You understand, Jack?"

Jack nodded, and then dropping his head on his hands, commenced to cry.

"My little Fay.... Never to dance again. I can't believe it.... Never still from morning till night.... I'm sorry I was cross about the pendant...."

Claudia stole softly into the garish, pretentious bedroom that seemed to mock them all with its air of coquetry.

The nurse had reduced it to something like order, but the thousand and one knickknacks were still lying about, and Claudia found the pale blue satin bows odious. Two tiny white satin slippers were on a chair. Claudia averted her eyes from them. They would never dance gleefully any more.

She found Fay lying with her blue eyes fixed wonderingly on the nurse, who was trying to induce her to take a restorative.

"Why are you here?" she was saying wonderingly. "You're a real nurse, aren't you? I don't understand. Why am I—Oh!" She gave a cry of relief at the sight of Claudia that accomplished the conquest of her sister-in-law's heart. "You'll tell me. I like you. What's the matter? Oh! I do feel that tired, too tired to move!"

"Don't you remember, dear, the curtain came down and hit you. You—you fainted, you know. We thought we'd get a nurse, because you—you'll have to stop in bed and rest for a while, and nurses know how to make one so comfortable, don't they?"

Her eyes jumped and snapped. "I'll? Me ill? Good gracious! then I can't play next week at Shepherd's Bush? I say, I must let them know at once. I'm topping the bill, and——"

"Don't worry about that," said Claudia soothingly, "we'll arrange that for you."

Fay was silent for quite a minute, and Claudia wondered of what she was thinking, but she did not dare to inquire. What was going on in that unformed, unreflective brain? Had she any suspicion?

"I heard of a man being struck by a curtain once," she said suddenly. "I must claim damages immediately. You instruct Samuels.... The pendant didn't bring me luck, after all.... I ought to get heavy damages. I'll talk to Samuels about it to-morrow."

CHAPTER XII

"ASHES"

THE following Monday morning brought an ugly scene with Gilbert, who learned not only the tragic and sensational news from the daily paper, but his wife's part in it. For somehow the reporters had found out that she was present at the performance, and "the beautiful Mrs. Currey" was credited in one sensational rag with having "dashed forward heroically to try and save her sister-in-law, The Girlie Girl, from the impact of the curtain." Claudia had not reckoned for this notoriety, and if Gilbert had shown any human sympathy with poor Fay she would have forgiven his ebullition of temper as excusable under the circumstances.

"You deliberately took advantage of my being in the country to frequent low music-halls with this woman," he flung at her, his eyes bloodshot with anger.

Claudia controlled her rising anger. "I went on the spur of the moment, Gilbert. Jack came in to fetch me on Saturday afternoon."

"I suppose you've been planning it for some time," he sneered. "It was a nice thing to have to explain to my

father and mother. My mother! who has never been in a music-hall in her life."

"Perhaps it would do her good if she had.... You talk as if I knew what was going to happen."

"Scandal on scandal!"

"Scandal! Is that all you can call it?" cried Claudia, a picture of Fay, so pitifully flattened out under the curtain, rising before her eyes. "Do you realize that she is paralysed for life—that everything is *finished* for her?"

"It's a pity she wasn't killed outright," returned Gilbert callously, "instead of remaining a disgrace to the family. But my mother warned me long ago," he added injudiciously, almost beside himself with rage, for now these paroxysms grew on him and contorted any sense of fairness or kindness that had ever been in his composition.

"Of what did your mother warn you?" said Claudia, her nostrils dilating, her eyes flashing. "Of marrying *me*? I insist on an answer."

"This isn't the first scandal in your family, is it? I'm not throwing your mother's sins up against you, you are not responsible for her; but why on earth have you got the same *flair* for the sensational? You've deliberately courted this by going to see this—this woman."

"Don't call her 'this woman,' as though she were a leper," said Claudia passionately. "She's earned her living by hard work ever since she was fourteen years old. How many women can boast of that? What if she hasn't led a conventional life? A good many women whom you shake by the hand are a good deal less virtuous, and certainly far less honest. Because she hasn't dodged behind a wedding-ring or covered up her tracks you look upon her with contempt. And even if she were the most unscrupulous, mercenary creature alive, you might be sorry now. Twenty-two, and life over for her!" To

Claudia, with her Grecian appreciation of youth and life, this seemed a tragedy of tragedies. Once, as a child, when a gambolling puppy from the stables had got under the wheels of the brougham and been killed she had wept for days, and as she had looked down at the little fat white body that would never frisk any more, she had learned a lesson never to be forgotten. The puppy had taught her early to see the inestimable boon of youth and life. To be *alive*, to have all one's faculties and powers of enjoyment, that is the great gift of the gods, she had told herself then. There had always been something of the pagan in her, and she had ever refused to believe that death is the gate of Life.

"So you are sprouting the modern jargon, are you?" said Gilbert angrily. "Listen, Claudia. You married me, and you must respect my name. I thought you were different from the women in your set, or I should not have married you. Apparently you are not different, but *I* am different from the husbands of those women. You'd better remember that. I allow you to go your own way, I give you perfect liberty, but on condition that you do not drag my name into club smoking-rooms and smart restaurants. There has never been a breath of talk about my mother, and there shall not be about my wife. If you want that kind of notoriety—you will not remain my wife."

Claudia stood motionless, listening to this outburst, very erect, her head thrown up, her neck making a beautiful but disdainful line with her chin. A sarcastic, enigmatic smile played round her sensitive mouth, and her eyes were cold and keenly critical. She had suddenly seen the coarseness of his lips, the deadly, soul-destroying coldness of his self-satisfied, sombre eyes. He was merely a male, a high-handed, aggressive male, with the highly specialized brain of a lawyer. Heart? When had he ever shown any heart? She had never once touched his

heart, only his senses. His feeling for his mother and father was only a sort of clannish family pride. Why, even Jack's love for Fay, lacking as it was in all the big qualities that make love worth while, was a much finer thing than Gilbert's feeling for her. For a moment a revulsion of shame, a feeling of humiliation swept over her at the thought of what she had given him.

"If you were not afraid of being laughed at, of being made to look small, you wouldn't care a jot what I did, would you?" she said with deadly precision. "You have a profound contempt for women, haven't you? You married me for my looks, because I aroused your passion, because it is the general habit of man to instal a woman in his home. I am installed here and I have the privilege of calling myself Mrs. Currey; otherwise, had I been a woman of lower station and more easy virtue, you would have fired me out long ago, wouldn't you? I am to live on the ashes of your passion—I, a woman with no children! You are asking too much, my husband. As for that poor, maimed child, I shall go to her as often as she wants me."

She was surprised, when he had gone, at the calmness with which she could turn to her ordinary occupations. She felt anger, contempt, the sting of her own humiliation, but he had no longer the power to wound her heart. She remembered the time—was it ages ago or only a year or so?—when, after an altercation or lack of response on his part, she had fled to her room and sobbed or brooded until she had made herself ill. Then her being had been shaken to its foundations, and she had felt the results on her nervous system for days.

But this morning, once the fierce blaze of her anger had burned out, she shrugged her shoulders and sat down to her *escritoire*. She must make her life without Gilbert. To allow a man she neither loved nor respected to destroy her balance would be a sign of weakness.

She was organizing, with Colin Paton, a concert in aid of a home for Penniless Gentlewomen, a charity which had always aroused her sympathy, and there was a good deal to be done. She was herself feeling Mrs. Milton to sing, and she had promised to come in that morning and give her some advice on the other artistes to be engaged.

It was not long before the maid showed her into her boudoir, but a much smarter-looking woman than she had been at Mrs. Rivington's party. Claudia had contrived to make her accept one or two modish dresses without hurting her feelings or her dignity, and she had also secured her several lucrative engagements. It is needless to say that Margaret Milton's generous heart held almost an adoration for Claudia.

"I hope I'm not late," she said, as she came into the room, "but I had to do a little grave-digging before I could get away. Ugh! I thought the whole neighbourhood would be poisoned, the monkeys!"

Claudia laughingly inquired whose grave she had been digging.

"You must know that a favourite cat died about a month ago, and was gathered to—the other cats in limbo. I allowed the children to bury it in the back garden—quite deep—and erect a tombstone. This morning, just as I was coming out, I became aware of an awful effluvia in the house. I wondered if the drains had suddenly gone wrong, and rushed round distraught. I found it was worse at the back of the house. Then I looked out of the window and saw——"

"No!"

"Yes. They had disinterred the cat to see how 'she was getting on.'"

After they had both laughed over the children's enterprise, they got to work. Claudia asked her opinion about an accompanist.

"Lucy Hamilton used to accompany most sympa-

thetically, but—no—I don't suppose she would have decent clothes to come up in, and I daresay she may not have kept up her music."

"Lucy Hamilton," repeated Claudia, "not a sister of——?"

"Yes, Frank's old-maid sister. Poor Lucy! She had such talent, and she was sacrificed to him right along."

Claudia pondered a minute. "Does she still live somewhere in the country?"

"Salisbury. Yes, she gives music-lessons at a shilling an hour! It must be torture to her. Her old mother and she live in a tiny home together."

"But, Mrs. Milton," said Claudia, bewildered, "are they as poor as all that? How can they be when——?" She stopped, and then she decided to put the question that had been on her lips. "Will she not accept help from her son Frank?"

"Oh, yes! he does help her—a little." Then she continued thoughtfully: "It does seem wrong, doesn't it, that people won't pay for pictures nowadays. I suppose we shall soon have no artists."

Claudia stared. "But he gets big prices now for his pictures. A couple of years ago, I know, he was nearly starving, but he gets his own prices now."

It was Mrs. Milton's turn to look startled. For the moment she had forgotten that Claudia and he were friends. She tried to gloss over what might have been an indiscretion.

"I'm glad to hear it; perhaps—no doubt he will be able to help them more soon.... I think Miss Ronald would accompany splendidly, and I've got her address at home."

"Mrs. Milton," went on Claudia, a curious expression in her eyes, "have you heard from this Lucy Hamilton *recently*? And has—Mrs. Hamilton been a good mother to him—them both?"

"I heard from Lucy only yesterday. I wanted her to come up for a change—you can't think how she revels in a few concerts, it's a joy to take her, and I can always get tickets—but her own words were: 'I'm much too shabby to come to town; such a lot of pupils owe me money, and mother's illness in the winter was expensive.' " She did not add that the writer had gone on to say that her brother did not like her to come to town unless she was decently dressed, and that though he was getting on and acquiring reputation, he could not at the moment help them more than he was doing.

"As for Mrs. Hamilton being a good mother," went on Mrs. Milton, "she's been one of the best. Her husband was a small solicitor and left them very badly off. It was she who screwed the money out of the housekeeping that Frank should go to Paris and study painting. Lucy, who was just as clever at music, had to teach herself. I do hope, now he is getting on, that Frank will make their lives easier."

"You don't like him?" said Claudia abruptly. There was a subtle something in Mrs. Milton's tone that convinced her.

Mrs. Milton hesitated.

"You can speak quite honestly. Why not? You knew him for some years, did you not?"

"Yes, we lived next door to them in the High Street for years. . . . I think artists are always rather egotistical and selfish, don't you? His mother adored him, and perhaps that doesn't do a man any good. I want my boys to have happy memories of their youth and me, but I do try not to spoil them. I try and remember that they will be husbands to some nice girls later on. He always let her do all the giving. . . . one shouldn't give too much, however much one loves. One should insist on some exchange, if only for the sake of the loved one."

"And yet" said Claudia, scrawling weird figures on

the blotting-pad, "they say that the ideal love means self-sacrifice, that true happiness is to be found in giving."

"But it isn't an ideal world in which we live, is it?" said Mrs. Milton gently. "Isn't that sometimes a form of selfishness? I know by experience with the children that it's often the tempting path, 'the easiest way,' but if one really loves the little minds and hearts, one must sometimes bear the tears and the sulks that follow when you are firm. You'll know that one day, when you have children of your own."

"And with men and women?"

"Many women, I think, have made themselves and their men unhappy by giving too much and too freely. It's become a habit with women. We can't stand their frowns and their tempers. But I'm sure it's a mistake. My husband is the dearest of men, but at the beginning of our life together I nearly became a doormat—just of my own accord.... Shall we fix on Miss Ronald?"

They worked steadily for half an hour, when there was a loud commotion on the stairs. It startled Margaret Milton, but Claudia knew the cause. Pat had lately acquired a huge puppy sheepdog, with the result that her arrival was always somewhat like that of a circus in full swing.

Pat and the dog, who had been christened Socrates because he was such a fool, came tumbling in together.

"He's chewed up half a mat downstairs while I was using your telephone, Claudia. How do you do, Mrs. Milton. Allow me, Mrs. Milton—Socrates. Socky, go and lie down and take a short snooze. He's the terror of Mayfair. He upset two children and a mail-cart this morning, and he's been in the Round Pond and splashed me from head to foot. How's poor little Fay getting on?"

"No change," said Claudia, with a sigh. "I'm going down there after lunch."

Pat drew in her breath. "Heavens! if anything like

that should happen to me, I'd go mad! I should yell the house down. She must know something. It's a fortnight now. She must suspect something."

"Sometimes I wonder," said Claudia. "Sometimes I think I see panic in her eyes, then the next moment she's asking me a conundrum she's found in some penny journal and roaring with laughter at my wild guesses. She talks about getting up soon—she's had the piano taken in, and yesterday she was singing 'to keep her voice from getting mildewy,' but—I don't know. If she knows—if she's got any suspicion, she's the pluckiest little soul I've ever known."

After that first awful night, it had become a practice for her to go down to the flat almost daily, each time devising some fresh forms of amusement—Fay was like a child—and directing the domestic machinery, which was now much smoother. The clinging helpless hands of Fay gave her a strange feeling, and a curious bond had sprung up between them. To Fay, Claudia, with her education and culture, was something wonderfully clever, something she had never known, something that made her long, in her generous, undisciplined heart, to emulate, to grow into. She considered Claudia's knowledge of books and pictures amazing. She told all her fellow-professionals who flocked to see her—and they were a strange, bizarre crowd—that her sister-in-law was the most wonderful and splendid lady in the world, and when Jack occasionally talked carelessly of his sister, she was roused to such volleys of wrathful words that the nurse had to ask him not to excite her. In all her moods—sometimes babyish, when she would play with dolls and mechanical toys; sometimes fretful, when nothing pleased her and she wailed to get well; sometimes optimistic and full of ideas for new turns and songs—Claudia was always wanted and loudly welcomed. Fay did not always want Jack—perhaps she divined something of his repug-

nance to sickness—she did not always want her “pals,” but she always listened eagerly for Claudia’s step in the hall, and if she did not come, sent the nurse to the telephone.

Soon after, Mrs. Milton took her departure.

Pat sat in a low chair, her long legs sprawling half across the room. For a long time neither of them spoke. Claudia stood gazing out of the window across the Park. The trees were gloriously green now, and like fluttering heralds of summer, brilliant in the sunlight. The sun touched the gilt of the Albert Memorial so that it mingled with the tender greens and almost reconciled her to it. She was thinking of Mrs. Milton’s story of Hamilton’s mother and sister. She knew her statement was correct. She knew several large cheques had been despatched to him by people with whom she had brought him in touch. Was he—she shrank from the word like a loathsome disease—was he *mean*? He had evidently not wished to renew his acquaintance with Mrs. Milton that night at the Rivingtons. Why? Did he desire to forget his small beginnings—the obligations of which she must have reminded him? It was a corroding idea, and Claudia was glad when Pat commenced to speak in a—for her—thoughtful tone.

“I must be a throw-back. That’s the explanation always trotted out nowadays, isn’t it?”

“A throw-back, Pat? What on earth are you talking about?” She turned and looked at the fresh, boyish face, the slim, long limbs, the sophisticated and yet innocent eyes of her sister.

“We’re a funny family, aren’t we? We’ve just dragged overselves up anyhow. I went to a lecture on heredity the other day. What do we inherit, I asked myself? Father’s an invertebrate jellyfish, and mother—well, mother’s Circe! Grandfather, on mother’s side, is a gay old dog still, and father’s father was a leader of lost

causes and died young. Bit of a jumble, isn't it? I've been puzzling over it for days. I heard someone say of you the other day—of course, they were discussing you in connection with The Girlie Girl—'she's Circe's daughter.' We're both Circe's daughters, and I'm not a bit like her. I say, I'm a throw-back somewhere. Mother always cared for men, never for women. I don't care a scrap for men in any sexual way—oh, yes! don't look so wise, I've experimented in a few flirtations—and I simply hate them—that way. I like hunting with them and playing golf and wading in the water, fishing, but directly they get sentimental and want to kiss me I curl up inside. Most girls, I've found out, like being kissed, even if they are not in love. I nearly murdered Dicky Trevor the other day because he kissed me unexpectedly on the nape of the neck. No, Circe hasn't given me any heritage, and I don't think I'm so backboneless as father. I've got a scheme growing in my head—I shan't tell you about it till I'm sure of my own mind—but it doesn't include a husband."

Claudia looked attentively at her sister. For the first time it flashed across her that the baffling thing about Pat was that so far she was quite sexless. She had been eager to come out for the fun of the dancing and the parties, but she had never had that shy anticipation of love that makes so many girls of eighteen eager to be presented. The books she read as a child were always stirring adventure stories, travels and records of real achievements. Fairy-tales with the all-conquering prince had bored her, all except the passages that dealt with sanguinary fights and treasure-trove. Later on she had read one or two famous French romances out of curiosity, but they had failed to make any appeal whatever. Her enthusiasms, her outbursts of passion, her thrills, were reserved for golf and hockey, and she had once said that the greatest and most satisfying moments of life to her were when she

was on the back of her favourite horse, following the hounds. She liked men. Indeed, on the whole, she preferred them to women, but only because they were better and more vigorous sportsmen and less liable to be petty and jealous. As Claudia surveyed her she realized that she neither could give nor did she wish to proffer advice. Pat must face her own problem. Before her marriage she would have rushed in where experience fears to tread, and talked to Pat of the joys of love, of the folly of the woman who disdained or belittled what man could offer. Now all her landmarks were gone. She had messed up her own life. All she could do was to listen and reflect what an awful muddle and enigma life was for women, and wonder why Providence had given them no chart to steer by.

"You see," continued Pat, "I've thought the thing out, and it wouldn't be playing cricket to marry a man if you didn't want him—that way. I tried to tell a man the other day how I felt, and he said he'd be a chum and wouldn't worry me; but I saw the look in his eyes even then, and I knew it would be hell for both of us. Men always want women that way."

Who had said something like that recently? Ah, yes! it had been said by Jack, apropos of Colin Paton.

"You are very wise this morning," said Claudia, with a forced laugh. "If you feel this way there may be men who also are celibates at heart."

"Haven't met any," said Pat laconically, giving Socky a kick to stop his stentorian dreams. "He's chasing bunnies in the Park."

"Oh! there are men. A good many women complain of—lack of attention on the part of their husbands."

"Then the attentions go to some other woman, or he's an uninteresting money-grabber."

"Don't generalize so much.... What about a man like Colin Paton?"

Pat laughed derisively, so that Socky got up and barked. "Shut up, you fool; I'm laughing at my sister, who has the foolishness of a babe! Have you known Paton all these years and not seen beneath the surface? Gracious! even if he likes me—which he doesn't expect to crack jokes with—that would be the last man I'd experiment with. He's full of emotion underneath that quiet exterior. If I could return it, I'd rather like to be loved by Colin Paton. Why, he'd make the most tender and ardent of lovers if he gained the heart of the right woman. Have you seen him with his widowed mother? Oh! he's perfectly sweet to her, and she adores him. She's such a nice, cosy thing, too; you feel you want to sit on a footstool at her feet and have her stroke your hair."

"If you're right, it's curious he hasn't married."

She was looking out of the window again, and she didn't see the curious look her sister cast at her. Pat finished up the conversation with:

"Come on, Socks, we're going to our happy home. Men like Colin Paton often get left because most women are fools where love is concerned. It's been the study of their lives for centuries, and even now they can't tell a piece of glass from a diamond. Because a man doesn't come along like a raging whirlwind they think he's cold, and because he loudly swears fidelity like a tinkling cymbal they think they can put their money on him. The metaphors are a bit mixed, but what I'm driving at is this. Women seldom have any judgment where men are concerned, and the nicer the woman the less sound is her judgment. Only bad women have good judgment regarding men. I—Patricia Iverson—have spoken. Selah! Socks!"

CHAPTER XIII

A DANGER SIGNAL

FRITZ NEEBURG was busily writing in his study when his man came to tell him that Carey Image had called to see him. He was just starting a chapter of his new book, entitled "Neurasthenia and its Causes," but he at once put his pen down.

"This is good of you to receive me," said Image warmly; "I can see you are busy."

"Not too busy to stop and have a chat with you. I hope you don't want to consult me professionally? You haven't got *the* disease of the age, have you?"

Image shook his bird-like head and then sighed.

"No, but I came on behalf of someone else—someone in whom you are interested, or I shouldn't waste your valuable time. Have you seen Gilbert Currey lately?"

"Not since the attack of influenza, when he"—dryly—"asked my advice and didn't take it."

"Ah! you *must* see him, Neeburg."

Neeburg never looked surprised or startled, he had the Teutonic phlegmatic temperament. He waited for Image to go on.

"My dear fellow, I won't usurp your province, but I don't like the look of him at all. I've seen men before

on the verge of a nervous breakdown. We got a good many out in India, and I've come to know that curious inward, burning look of the eyes.... I was very upset yesterday. I met him suddenly in King's Bench Walk and he—didn't know me."

Neeburg opened his eyes a little.

"He passed it off by saying he was immersed in some difficult case; but I could see he was intensely annoyed with himself, and that led me to deduce it is not the first time his memory has played a trick on him. I needn't say any more to you, as a physician, except that Robson, the Attorney-General, told me in confidence the other day that he is taking far too much work, and that he is not—doing it well. He's noticed a great change in him, and he told me, as an old friend, to use my influence to make him take a holiday."

The eyes of the two men met—Image's brilliantly bright through his eyeglasses, those of the physician calmly reflective. Then Neeburg got up from his seat and paced the room without speaking.

"I've warned him repeatedly," he said at length, "and I've watched it coming. But Gilbert is not an easy man to prescribe for. He is eaten up with ambition, he is so keen on 'the game' that he takes no heed of warnings, mine or Nature's. That man has worked like a horse for the last five years; in fact, he has worked incessantly ever since his boyhood, when his father urged him to win scholarships for the glory of the Currey family.... The father has only been half a success; he had driving power but no judgment, and he was unpopular at the Bar. He took up politics, but he was too vehement and dogmatic for his party. He concentrated his ambition on Gilbert, and Gilbert is very like him—very. With Gilbert, what I call 'the game' is the very marrow of his bones. You might as well ask him to change his body as change his manner of life. He had a very good

constitution, and I hoped it would stand the strain.... But it's gone to pieces very badly of late. Outside people will say suddenly, but he's been undermined for some time. If his memory is going God help him and Claudia!"

"Extraordinary he can be so blind to her charm and qualities....extraordinary!... I am sometimes ashamed he is my godson."

"The men in the Currey family have—to put it bluntly—*used* women. They have never rated them highly. Claudia is a very emotional, highly-strung woman, with all sorts of splendid qualities which he does not appreciate; she was never meant to marry a Currey."

"In my young days we didn't hear so much talk of 'the game,' this feverish desire to work one's self into an early grave. Is it a modern failing, doctor?"

"No, men have always sacrificed themselves and devoted their best energies to it, but to-day we are suffering from it in an aggravated form, because most of the things men set their hopes upon are not worth while. It gets worse every year. This craze for luxury, for display—and that comes a good deal from our women-folk—first of all eggs a man on to accumulate money or make a position, then the spirit of the game gets into him, even if he isn't born with it, and before he has time to turn round and reflect he is in the midst of the scrimmage and he doesn't want to get out of it. It's a poison that eats into the very flesh, that corrodes his blood, that makes him blind to the waste of his life. Oh! I've been watching it for years."

Image's bright eyes watched Neeburg.

"It's worse in America than it is here, but every day the pace gets hotter, the gambling more feverish. The wrecks of men that have passed through my hands, men that at forty and earlier are practically used up, and no amount of drugs or rest will do them much good! They

'get through' the rest of their lives instead of living! While you were in India I practised in New York for a couple of years with Finlay McKay. One man came to me at the beginning of my stay, and begged me to pull him together. I preached a holiday, relaxation. He said 'No,' but as soon as he had made a couple of million dollars he'd stop. He'd set himself that task. A year later he came to me in such a frazzled state that I was ashamed of my sex. He'd made his pile, he'd gained his ambition. 'Now rest,' said I, 'you have still a slender chance if you're careful.' 'I can't, doctor,' he said. 'I can't do anything except work. I've done what I set out to do, but I can't stop now. Life without my work wouldn't be worth while. I thought it was a bank balance I wanted, but it's "the game!"' I told that man I would give him six months if he didn't clear out of it and go for a long sea voyage. There, in my presence, he deliberately chose the six months. He died in four.... Most men nowadays are crazy to get ahead of other men. To a man, 'the game': to a woman, love; for whatever women may do or have done, love for them will always remain the great adventure."

"Love was for me 'the great adventure,' as well as for her," said Image quietly. "But there, I have something of the woman in me. I realize that."

"And you have a thousand happy memories, and you still enjoy every minute of your life, don't you? Everything in the world interests you. You have provided yourself with a future. You're a wise man, Image."

The little man shook his head with a smile. "A sweet and a brave woman was wise for me, Neeburg.... You will use your influence with Gilbert?"

"Yes, I will try and frighten him. I did that once very successfully, but my patient was not so stubborn as Gilbert. He had a wife and four children, and she begged me to stop him while there was yet time. He was

already in such a state of nerves that the home was all misery and apprehension. Generally we tell patients that they are better than they really are, but this man I frightened stiff. He went for a long sea-voyage, and the fright and the cleansing breath of Nature—oh! so kindly, if we would only heed her!—cured him. He's doing exceedingly well now—he's rapidly becoming famous—but he's going slow, and they are bringing up their boys to ignore this modern competitive spirit.... I'll do my best, Image, you may be sure of that. But his vigorous early manhood is against him. He won't believe, I fear, in the danger that threatens.... Have you heard about Colin Paton? I was told yesterday by Sir Andrew Morgan that he's going to create a sensation shortly by one of the finest books on Sociology that has so far been written. Sir Andrew read it for a publishing firm, and he confessed it staggered him—the knowledge and judgment of the thing. I'm glad; I always knew there was real stuff in Paton!"

CHAPTER XIV

AN UNEMOTIONAL FISH

CLAUDIA had been giving a little luncheon-party, and she had kept Mr. Littleton, the American publisher, in order to have a talk with him on a new volume of poetry she had been reading. The other guests had all gone, and she always enjoyed talking to him. It was left to him to give her the news of Paton's book.

"By and by," he said casually, "Mr. Colin Paton is a friend of yours, is he not? I think I have heard you mention his name?"

"Oh, yes!" returned Claudia easily, "I have known him for years. He has always been a guide, philosopher and friend, and especially in your department."

"Don't! It sounds as if I sold ribbons at the stores.... Then, of course, you know about this book of his on Sociology that is bound to make a stir this autumn?"

Claudia sat up abruptly in her chair.

What book? Has Colin Paton written a book on Sociology?"

"One of the finest, if not the finest, that has yet been written. Such a lot of twaddle and froth is usually poured forth on that subject, but this book is the real thing, and exceedingly well written too. I've secured it for America, where we've got a good many books on that

subject. But I reckon this will put all the others out of court. Where has he got all his knowledge, Mrs Currey?"

Claudia was some little time before she replied to his question. Colin had not told her! He had been writing this book for a long time, and he had never confided in her! She had thought they were such intimate friends, she had always taken it for granted that he told her—well, most things that were not other people's secrets, and she was left to learn of his book from a new friend. Why, surely she might have expected that he would have told her long ago of his intention to write it. She had always thought their friendship meant that.

She was very hurt and also a little astounded. It was as though a favourite and well-known view had suddenly taken on an entirely new aspect. Another landmark that she thought was firmly planted in almost eternal solidity seemed to have shifted. She wondered wildly if the whole world were not built on a quicksand, if there were any stability or permanence in any of the human emotions or relations. Their vaunted friendship, what was it worth, if it did not mean that she had his confidence and he had hers?

Littleton wondered at the blank look on her face as she replied rather mechanically:

"Oh, I think he has been studying such questions for years, ever since he was up at Oxford. He's not a man to talk much or make any show.... Yes, I can quite imagine the book is good."

She could not turn and accuse herself of living in a fool's paradise, for she was too unhappy to dwell in such a favoured, sunny clime; but did she know the world she lived in, the people by whom she was surrounded? Why, her younger sister Pat had been accusing her only the other day of bad judgment where men were concerned. Pat had laughed at her on this very subject, and said she

did not really know Colin Paton. Was it true? Can one see a man constantly for years and not really know the inner man? But she had always credited herself with unusual powers of divination. She despised other people for taking the world and its creatures at face-value.

"The amount of reading he must have done for this book is enormous," went on Littleton. "Because, unlike most wildly enthusiastic reformers, who fling adjectives about and scream at the top of their voices, he has marshalled an amazing array of facts and figures. That, and his own discrimination and judgment, make the book so fine. And there are one or two passages, where he lets himself go, that are absolutely stirring. As you know"—with a laugh—"I'm in the trade, and I don't often enthuse over a book, but I was greatly struck with this."

"I am glad," said Claudia dully, "very glad."

This book had been in his mind for years, perhaps ever since he left Oxford, and he had never talked of it to her. She would never forgive him! He had not thought her worthy of his confidence. He was not her friend. Then a vision of him at Fay's flat that awful night, quietly directing everyone and watching over her, came across her mental vision, but this only confused her the more. Did he, like most men, look upon her as a graceful, pretty plaything—just a woman? Was his idea of a woman just like her husband's, only different in kind? Apparently she was of no real use to anyone, except—yes, except to the little music-hall artiste whom the family had rejected.

Then she looked at the man in the chair beside hers, and as her preoccupation had made him drop his guard, she read clearly the very personal admiration in his eyes. For a moment they remained looking at one another, love in the man's eyes, a hopeless bewilderment and weariness in Claudia's.

"Your life does not satisfy you," said the man abruptly. "I have known that for some time."

"Is anyone satisfied with his life?"

She was a little startled, but a beautiful, much-sought-after woman is seldom nonplussed by such a situation. She had seen that look in too many men's eyes. It was only startling with Littleton because she had not noticed that he was falling in love with her. Was that because she had been thinking of Frank to the exclusion of other men? For though love itself may not be blind, it makes a woman insensible to the feelings of other men and her very preoccupation often piques them into desiring her.

Littleton got up and leaned against the mantelpiece, looking down upon her. His straight, spare figure, in his unmistakable American clothing, bespoke energy and endurance. The shape of his head, on the forehead of which the fair hair was thinning a little, told of great mental activity and powers of organization. Some woman might be proud of such a man. In some ways he was not unlike Colin Paton, save that he had the American restlessness and nerviness, and that he lacked the fine polish and self-possession which a man may possibly acquire, but is usually associated with families that can count back many centuries, and that have always tried to uphold the best traditions of English manhood. Paton's ancestors had mainly been divided into two classes, fighters and scholars. Admiral Worrall Paton had fought many a fight with Francis Drake on the high seas, and another Paton in the reign of Elizabeth had been accounted a great and learned savant at court. Before that time, in the reign of Henry the Seventh, there had been a namesake of Colin's who had fought bravely for the crown, and helped to subdue Lord Lovel's rising in Yorkshire. Claudia knew of these and of several more worthy and later ancestors, for she had once visited his Elizabethan country home, where his mother still lived, and

he had, with laughing comments, conducted her through the gallery of family portraits, which showed, he said, that there had never been any fatal beauty in the family. But she had been struck even then, as a girl—she had only been seventeen at the time—with the indefinable air of breeding and intellectual distinction which they all bore. There was an unmistakable stamp on the faces of all the Patons, which said as plainly as words, “Death before dishonour.” Colin had told her the story of one youth, a gay Royalist with laughing eyes, who had fallen from honour by parting, under pressure from the woman he loved, with one of the King’s secrets. “But, like Judas,” said Colin, “he went out and hanged, or rather shot, himself almost directly afterwards. You, who feel so intensely the joy of life—look at his laughing eyes!—will believe that he expiated his sin.”

At Gilbert’s home, too, there was a small picture-gallery—not very large, for the Curreys had never had any artistic leanings, and had only had their portraits painted to feed their own vanity and pomp—but the Curreys were a different race. Worthy—yes, probably—but heavy and coarse-featured, with none of the fineness and delicacy that distinguished the Patons, and some of them obviously too full-blooded, with the limited vision which embraces only the material things of life.

The man who stood looking down upon her now was of different type from either. He belonged to the virile new world; he had its good qualities and its defects. Like Colin, he was a good companion to be with, but he was so virile and so mettlesome that he occasionally left her rather exhausted.

“Well?” he queried smilingly, not attempting to answer her question.

“I was thinking.”

“I know you were. One can always see the thoughts flitting through your eyes. I have often longed to know

what you were thinking about. I believe your thoughts are worth hearing. Won't you tell me this time?"

She found herself liking his voice, which had a slight American inflection without being nasal.

"I was thinking how different the American man is from the average Englishman, both in mind, temperament and physique."

"We're certainly beaten under the last head," he replied, with a frank laugh. "I am always admiring your Englishmen from the point of view of good looks, though you know our men can be pretty fit, as we've shown in your sports' contests. But we're not such good lookers, sure. As for temperament"—he looked at her with a little challenge in his grey-blue eyes—"that isn't racial, you know; it's individual. I guess one of my countrymen may possess it as well as an Englishman. And what do you mean by a temperament, anyway?"

Claudia shook her head. She refused to be drawn. "Impossible to define. Those who have it do not need a definition, and those who have it not—will never find one. Didn't someone once say: 'Art is life seen through a temperament'?"

"But I'm not an artist," he replied quickly, "only a merchant, who purveys works of art through the medium of a printing-press. Do you think that only professed artists may possess a temperament?"

"Of course not. That would be too ridiculous. I daresay some of the greatest artists are inarticulate."

"I am glad to hear you say that, because I should have hated to have you put me right out of court. Because," he spoke slowly, "lately I have begun to realize that a certain resurrection is going on within me; that what I tried deliberately to kill is still alive, painfully alive."

She was aware that he was on the verge of a confidence, and she only looked her interest. She liked him, and she felt she wanted to know more about him; for

never had they discussed their private lives with one another. He was introducing a new element into their friendship.

"I married before I was twenty-two, and last fall I became a widower. I married early after deliberation and sober reflection. Isn't it curious that one can so often reflect more soberly when one is twenty than when one is approaching forty, as I am now? I married, my friends said, most suitably. I was not what you would call in love with her. I had known her for years, and I was fond of her in a quiet, unemotional way, which you people of temperament despise. I married young to have my mind and energies free for my work of restoring an old firm to its original activity and greatness. I realized that if youth wants to toe the straight line, it must keep clear of emotional complications. I saw other men taken off their work, their senses flaying them into madness and folly, by the women they met. I determined that I would marry and keep clear of attractive women. I would settle down early into a family man, and if there were joys that I knew not—well, the man who has been born blind doesn't know the glory of the sunshine. My wife was placid and quite content with the small amount of leisure and attention I could give her. All my best energies I gave to my work. Every American is born ambitious; it's in the very air he breathes, and with his first little squalling breath he draws it in. I had rather a tough fight, but I won out all right.... Now I am nearly forty I begin to wonder if I have done the best with my life; I begin to see that perhaps those other fellows who never got on are not to be pitied after all. I begin to feel a hiatus in my life; I begin to see what life *might* be."

As he looked at the beautiful vivid woman among the cushions of the arm-chair, he recalled the quiet, orderly life he had led with the one who had borne his name,

the lack of anything approaching exaltation or beauty in their relationship, the prosaic monotony of their days, and he wondered if he had not been the greatest of God's fools. What would life be with such a woman as the one who now sat plaiting her fingers in her lap, her very finger-tips pulsating with life? The magnetism of her womanhood reached him as he stood, and made his breath come more quickly. They had so much in common already, was it too wild and venturesome to hope that they might have more?

"In short," she said slowly, "you have sacrificed the best years of your life to what you men call 'the game.' But you have succeeded. Many men sacrifice everything and—fail. You may feel at odd moments that you have missed something, but I expect you are really quite satisfied. You know the proverb about the cake?"

"Yes, but did I choose the best kind of cake?"

She broke the spell by laughing. It sounded so odd. It reminded her of the days when, as a child, she used to hover over the plate of cakes anxiously seeking to make a good choice.

"That's life," she laughed. "If you take the chocolate one, you always wish you had taken the jam-puff. And, after all," a little wearily, "what does it matter—chocolate or jam? Equally sweet, perhaps, and equally unwholesome."

He joined in her laugh and held out his hand. "I must go now. Let me come again soon, will you? I enjoyed your charming luncheon-party, but much more have I enjoyed this talk with you. Somehow I always want to talk to you, and I have the reputation for being rather a silent man. I wonder why you inspire me?"

Her hand was in his and she smiled mischievously and mockingly as she said: "I suppose it's because I talk so much. It makes you feel that you must uphold the superior ability of your sex in all things, even conversation."

But he did not smile. His eyes were searching her face, noting the soft, velvety texture of the skin—how he longed to press his lips on her full, creamy throat even more than on her lips—the satiny gloss of her luxurious hair, the long eyelashes which, as he stood above her, swept her cheeks, the small, straight nose and delicate ears.

“You are a very sweet and fascinating woman,” he said suddenly, “and I am sorry that we ever did anything so vulgar as to use your portrait for a book cover. Good-bye.”

For a few minutes after he had taken his departure Claudia sat thinking about him. Unlike Frank Hamilton, he did not set her pulses singing, and leave her inwardly shaken when he released her hand; but, on the other hand, she found herself considering him more seriously. She conjectured more about him; she found herself wanting his opinion, just as she did Colin Paton’s. Colin! That reminded her of the beginning of their conversation. Colin had clearly shown that their friendship was to him but a small thing. She found herself clenching her fingers into the palm of her hand as she reflected on the secret he had kept from her. This man Littleton was not in any way the equal of Colin Paton, either in brain or in character; but he was evidently trying to tell her how much he appreciated their acquaintanceship, trying to let her know that he realized now what a big part a woman might play in his life. Pat was quite, *quite* wrong. Colin was an unemotional fish; he even took their friendship coldly.

“And I want love, life, warmth!” she cried to her empty drawing-room. “I am tired of leading this deadly existence. I want someone to love me, to tell me so, to make me feel that he loves me.”

She looked at the room through a blinding mist, so that the delicate walls and the Louis Quinze furniture all

swum in a haze, and nothing stood out save the fact that the room, like her heart, was empty, and there was no one to hold out two arms ready to enfold her.

Then she strangled a sob in her throat, and the room became once more the charming, orderly room it always was, filled with sweet scented flowers and majestic palms.

"You're a fool, Claudia, a fool! a fool! a fool!" she said through her half-closed teeth. "You want things that you will never get, that probably don't exist except in your stupid imagination."

Then she went quickly out of the room to her bedroom, where her outdoor clothes were lying on the bed. She rang the bell for her maid.

"Order the car for me, please. I am going to see Mrs. Iverson. Give me that box of picture-puzzles I got for her."

Fay always wanted her. She would go where she was wanted.

CHAPTER XV

WHY NOT?

CLAUDIA asked the usual question of the nurse who met her in the hall of the flat. It was now three weeks since Fay's accident.

"Sir Richard said definitely to-day that everything has now been tried," said the nurse sadly, for both the day and the night nurse had grown fond of their odd little patient. "I think they always knew it was hopeless.... I fear she is growing suspicious. She cried a good deal of last night, and only slept for a couple of hours. Nurse Calderon said she thought she heard her whisper to herself in the night: 'Oh, God! I can't! I can't! Let me get better!' Poor little thing! It's too horrible, and, of course, everything will—will get worse."

Claudia, who had read up the progress of such cases in a medical book she had found in Gilbert's library, gave assent. She knew that the end of such cases is the abject humiliation of human flesh where so many of the functions of the body are paralysed. The account had made her feel sick in the reading, and she shrank from the thought of all that lay before the girl—she was little more—who lay in the bedroom beyond.

Claudia opened the bedroom door full of misgivings, her heart very heavy as the thought of Fay's night vigil,

so that she was unprepared for the sight that met her gaze. The room always was a bower of flowers, generally coloured ones, for Fay said bluntly that white ones reminded her of a funeral; but this afternoon it presented an unusually gay aspect. The apartment was almost gaudy, and at first Claudia did not take in why it was so bright. Fay was propped up among a nest of pillows, her tiny face, very little changed, hidden under an enormous black hat with three great blue feathers floating over it. The bed was strewn with hats, the chairs were littered with them. Pink cardboard boxes of various sizes stood everywhere.

"Darling, you've come in the nick of time," called out Fay excitedly. "Isn't this a duck of a hat? You see, I must have some new hats. I shall be better soon now, and it's no good getting up and finding you've got nothing to put on your cocoanut. And Madame Rose has got all her new models for the summer. This is French. You can see that with half an eye, can't you? I call it shick, don't you? Something like a hat."

A dark-eyed Jewess, who had evidently brought the hats, was standing at the foot of the bed, and broke in with:

"Straight from Parry, Miss Morris," she said glibly, though it was evident that it had been concocted in some cheap London warehouse. "Very latest thing. Real style there. I thought of you as soon as I saw it. It's too good for anyone else, I said."

"Ah! did you? Give me the hand-glass. I want to see how my dial looks under it. Ugh! like an under-done muffin left out in the rain. Give us over the rouge and the powder-puff. And the bunch of curls out of the drawer. Where's that eyebrow pencil I had this morning? I rub the blessed stuff off on the pillow. There! that's better, cocky. Now I've got a bit of bloom. We're not forty and in the cupboard yet, thank the Lord! It

saves a lot of trouble if you've got dark eyebrows. Yours don't rub off and get smeary, do they?"

"It's curious," smiled Claudia, removing one of the hats in order to sit down, "that your eyebrows are so light when your hair is so dark."

Fay gave a whoop that showed her lungs were not affected.

"You dear holy innocent! Did you think my hair was really this colour? Not much. The hair-dresser does it, and jolly expensive it is. My hair, as a child, was a silly soppy sort of light shade, so I improved on it. I'm much more effective with black hair. Makes a bit of a contrast. Got the idea out of a story where a man was raving over blue eyes and black hair. First of all, I tried red. But it's so difficult with hats and all the boys call you Ginger."

She might have been discussing the colour of a parasol, so impersonal and frank was her tone. Evidently it never occurred to her that these were what is called in ladies' papers, "secrets of the toilet-table."

Fay turned to the girl, who was adjusting the trimming on another hat, equally large and covered with roses of a nightmare shade of pink.

"You remember my hair when it was red, don't you, Vera?" She chuckled. "I remember you didn't know me when I came into the shop, and you was so polite"—she gave Claudia a wink—"that I knew you hadn't spotted me. I'd run up the devil of a bill, and Madame Rose was giving me the frozen eye just then. I think I shall keep to black now. It does suit me, doesn't it?"

"Admirably," returned her sister-in-law, controlling a desire to laugh.

"I like your hair," commented Fay; "there are sort of coloury bits in it. I thought at first you must dye it, only Jack told me you didn't, and that it was like that when you were a kid. It's real pretty. Darling, try on this

hat. I want to see it on someone else. There's no doubt it's stylish. I hate the sort of hats nobody notices. When I pay big money I like to get the goods."

Claudia good-naturedly removed her own smart little toque of white brocade and skunk, and placed the top-heavy *confection* upon her head.

Fay's face was a study in astonishment and dismay as she looked at the other woman.

"Well, I'm blowed! It looks—oh! sort of funny—and"—she shook her head—"Vera, are you sure it's good style? All right, keep your hair on, I didn't say it wasn't, only—— Crickey Bill, does it look like that on me?"

The girl from the shop eyed Claudia with no great favour. Her small, beady eyes looked sourly and enviously at the perfectly-cut, black velvet gown and elegant skunk and ermine furs. She was cute enough to realize that Claudia's clothes were the "real thing" and spelt not only money—her own wares were absurdly overpriced—but taste. She was accustomed to serving "ladies" in the profession, who familiarly called her "Vera, my dear," and asked, and generally took her advice, as well as swallowed her fulsome flattery.

"Take it off," said Fay almost sharply. "I hate it now. It's too large, it's too——" Then, with a sudden change to wistfulness, she added, "but it's you that makes it wrong. You're good style, and I'm not. I'm common, dead common. I don't wonder you didn't want me in the family."

"Fay, dear, don't." Claudia glanced at the sulky Vera, who was packing up the hats. Apparently Fay had never heard of the undesirability of washing dirty linen in public.

"You're a lady. A blind man could see that. If you hadn't been so sweet I'd have hated you directly I saw you. I knew what you were at once. Of course, Jack is a perfect gentleman, but that's different somehow,

except"—vaguely—"I liked him a bit extra for it. He looks different in his clothes to the other men, and yet those men spend a lot of money too. I knew a man once, he owned a couple of halls in the Midlands, and he told me he had fifty-two waistcoats, one for every week of the year. I don't suppose Jack's got as many as that?"

She was adjusting a saucy matinée cap, a dainty affair of pink ribbon and lace.

"I am sure he hasn't."

"Won't you take no hat at all?" said the annoyed shop-girl, breaking in rudely. "You might take this one with the pink roses. I'm sure that's quite enough."

"No, no, I'll wait till I can come to the shop. Here, my dear, here's a half a crown for your trouble. I'll come in—soon." She looked quickly from the shop-girl to Claudia, a desperate question in her blue eyes.

"That's a much better arrangement," returned Claudia cheerfully. "We'll go together, shall we?"

"Yes, yes," cried Fay eagerly, clapping her hands. "But, I say," as the door closed behind the girl and her hat-boxes, "will you take me to *your* hat shop where that came from?"

"With pleasure."

"What; come here." Fay beckoned her imperiously to her side. "Do you mean you are not ashamed of me? I could keep my mouth dead shut, you know. Do you mean that you'd let me wear the same sort of hats as you, that you'll try and make a lady of me?"

Claudia could not speak, she gently nodded.

"Well," said Fay huskily, her eyes suspiciously moist, "you're *it* all right, that's all I can say. I—you can touch me for anything you want. You've only got to ask me. I say, hand me over that leather case from the chest of drawers—yes, that's the one."

Wonderingly, Claudia obeyed, and handed her the case which was a cheap leather imitation.

Fay opened the case with a key from under her pillow and rummaged inside. Presently she produced a small box.

"There! I want to show you this. It's for you. It's quite straight; you needn't think I got it in any—any way you wouldn't like. I bought it off someone who was hard up." "It" was a diamond and ruby brooch, and quite a tasteful affair in the form of two hearts, transfixed by an arrow.

"Oh! but Fay, I couldn't——

"Take it, I say, or I shall think you don't mean what you said just now. Two hearts, d'yer see—you and me! Quite romantic, isn't it? Put it on that lacy thing at your throat. Yes, it looks nice. No, you're not going to thank me. Just give me a kiss, that's all."

For a few moments the lips of the two met, so different in their upbringing and views of life, but strangely brought together by the hand of Fate.

"Now look at my joolery. Never seen it, have you? Well, it aint so dusty, if I says it. I've always got them to shell out all right. After all," with a quaint little touch of vanity, "when you top the bill you're worth it, and I don't believe in making yourself cheap or making men meaner than they are. Not that I exactly like them for what they give you, but it shows they do like you, because a man doesn't stump up easily.... There, that's a stunning pendant, isn't it? It cost two hundred and fifty, because I went and chose it."

Claudia was astounded at the value of the jewellery that reposed in the shabby, unremarkable leather case. She saw that Fay loved the things by the way she touched them. Some of them were beautiful. But presently Fay gave a sigh and, selecting a large diamond pendant which she put round her neck, over her nightdress, she shut up the case. "Put the things back," she said queerly. "I—I——" Then, to Claudia's dismay, she began to sob

rather pitifully like a frightened child. Claudia drew the little head to her breast.

"Hush, dear, you mustn't excite yourself. It's bad for you. Nurse will say it's my fault, you know."

"I'm not very old," sobbed Fay, "I'm only twenty-two. Some people live to be very old."

Claudia tried to think of a laughing reply, but no words would come. She could only rearrange the matinée cap and put her own cool cheek against the one wet with tears.

"Fay, dear, to please me—you said you'd do anything for me—don't cry so. Are you—are you in pain?"

She wiped the tears away gently with her handkerchief, the rouge from the cheeks coming off too.

Presently Fay grew a little calmer.

"Claudia, I want to ask you something because you are honest." Oh! how Claudia's heart sank! She dreaded what the next words would be, but as usual the unexpected came from Fay.

"Do you think *this* is a punishment for—for not being good? Nurse has got a Bible, and I—just for fun—asked her to read me a bit. It frightened me. I'm not what you call bad, am I?"

"No, Fay," said Claudia steadily, determined that not all the religion or moral teaching in the world should make her distress the doomed woman. "No, Fay, don't distress yourself. I don't believe for an instant this is a punishment." She tried to speak simply, but the task was difficult. Her own religion was a very vague one. She believed that if there were a God, as so many Christians averred, a God who was all-loving, understanding beyond finite conception, there could never be any question of punishment such as Fay suggested. Fay's mind and morals were stunted, undeveloped. Since she had come in contact with the queer people who were her fellow "pros," Claudia had come very clearly to recognize that

the lives of such artistes, especially those like Fay, who had been born practically on the boards of a music-hall, were not subject to the ordinary judgments of society. Theirs was a little world of its own, with its obligations, its own ideas of right and wrong. To do another artiste out of a job, to queer her turn, to refuse to put your hand in your pocket for a deserving case, to crib another person's business or her "fancy boy," those were unpardonable sins in Fay's world. To have flitted from lover to lover—in her case without any breaking of hearts or ugly recriminations—was only a venial one.

Fay gave a huge relieved sigh. "If you say so, I won't worry about that any more. Of course, mind you, I ought to have kept straight. Mother told me that when I was a kid. But I don't know. Men always liked me, you see, and I'm fond of them. Of course, I know *you* wouldn't do the things I've done."

Claudia inwardly winced. That very morning she had had an impassioned lover-like letter from Frank complaining that she never came for the sittings now. "I know you have been a great deal with your sister-in-law, but sometimes I fear you cannot care for me when you can live without seeing me. To me, you are the whole world."

"I expect Jack and I are pretty poor tripe," continued Fay calmly. Then a new thought struck her. "I say, that night I fainted, I thought I heard a nice voice in the hall, a man's voice. It wasn't the doctor, because he's got a down-in-your-boots voice, and it wasn't none of my pals. Was it someone, or did I fancy it?"

"I think it was probably a friend of mine, Colin Paton. He got the specialist and nurse for you, and often inquires after you."

"That's jolly decent of him, because he doesn't know me from Adam." She looked round her at the many vases crowded with flowers. "But people have been nice

to me, haven't they? It shows I'm liked, doesn't it?" It was such harmless vanity that Claudia smiled. "Is your friend a great swell, Sir Somebody or other?"

"Oh, dear, no." Claudia found herself laughing at the idea of anyone calling Colin Paton "a great swell." She must remember to tell him, he would enjoy the joke too. Then she stiffened a little. No, she would not tell him *anything*. He left her out of his life. "He's the simplest and kindest of men, a friend one can always rely on." Her sense of fairness prompted her to say so much.

"He's old, then?"

"No, about thirty-eight. Did my description sound like a greybeard?"

"Yes, 'kind' sounds so old somehow. Of course, he's gone on you. He must be. Would he come and see me, do you think? Why," with a sudden flash of inspiration, "it must be the man Polly said was here that night and treated her as if she was a duchess, and thanked her for everything. Polly flopped immediate. She's had a balmy look ever since. Oh, yes, I don't think! Is he handsome?"

"No, only nice looking."

"Well, I should like him to have black, flashing eyes—don't you love black, flashing eyes—and dark curly hair, and long, white hands like the man in the novel, 'Did He Love Her.' I'll just have to listen to his voice Must you go now? Oh, well, I suppose I musn't be selfish. Jack will be in soon. It's rough on Jack me being like this, isn't it? Only a log for a wife He's better than I expected, because"—with a canny wag of her head—"Jack didn't marry me to have me lying here like this. Men like their women to be pretty lively and 'on the go,' especially when they marry someone of my sort. Poor old boy! I'm really fond of Jack, you know. He's always treated me decently. I hope I'll

get well or else—— All right, yes, of course, I won't worry. Come again to-morrow. Where are you going?"

"To my mother's. She's got a musical afternoon, and I must look in. Several grand opera stars and a great pianist. It will be very fireworky, I'm sure. Good-bye, dear."

Fay kissed her hand gaily as Claudia smilingly withdrew.

In the hall she met Jack coming in.

"Hallo! Claud." He heaved a deep sigh. "I say, this is breaking my heart."

"Don't think about *your* heart, think about hers," said Claudia, putting her hand on his shoulder. He looked very dejected and some of the youth had gone out of his face. The contented, well-fed expression was flecked with something closely resembling unhappiness. "She is not likely to live for many years, and let's try and make the best of it for her, Jacky boy."

"It's hell hearing her talk about her new songs and going to Paris with me.... I shall blurt out the truth one day, sure as Fate. It's lucky I've got a stolid sort of look, but it breaks me up inside. I remember talking to you once about thinking too much and rootling about for meanings in life. Why should Fay have to die like this? She hasn't harmed anyone!"

Claudia shook her head and was silent. Many greater minds than poor Jack's had wrestled with that problem, and there had never been, and never would be, any answer. With Jack, his belated questioning was rather pathetic. He had never wanted to ask questions, he had been content just to live, and now his happy-go-lucky love for Fay had turned into tragedy.

As they stood there they could faintly hear the parrot in the distance still calling, "Chuck it! Chuck it!" accompanied by a hoarse chuckle that seemed to mock them with some uncanny knowledge. The little hall was tidy

now, but it meant that its volatile mistress would never dash through it any more.

"I say, Claud," said Jack, taking off his coat, "what's come over Gilbert? I went into court to-day—a fellow I know was interested in an arbitration case, had money invested—and when we got there I found Gilbert had been briefed. He started splendidly in that 'listen to me' sort of manner, and then he got muddled. He couldn't remember the name of the firm he was speaking about, and he had to ask his junior. Everybody was noticing it. Why, he used to have such a ripping memory! What's wrong with the works?"

Claudia was not so alarmed as she well might have been had she known the symptoms of nerve breakdown.

"Perhaps he took the case up in a hurry, sometimes he has to do that, you know."

"No, he didn't, because the fellow with me told me that he knew he had been secured for the case a long time ago. I heard someone say he was going to pieces."

"He wants a holiday.... Mother will think I am never coming. Go in and talk to Fay."

He saw her into her car, and a few minutes later Claudia found herself alighting on the red carpet outside her old home. The sounds of a violin played by a master hand reached her as she entered. The Rivingtons were just going, Mrs. Rivington very shrill and chatty, and the General rather tottery and deaf.

"I say," said Mrs. Rivington, with a glint of malice in her eye, "is it true your friend Frank Hamilton is going to marry Mrs. Jacobs? Good thing for him, I should say. She's just rolling in money, almost indecent, and anyone can see she's madly in love with him. It's all very well to talk art," sneeringly, "but it usually spells money, doesn't it? Artists are just like the rest of us, only they pretend a bit more. He's always with her, so I suppose the engagement will be announced soon."

Claudia attributed the remarks to ill-nature on Mrs. Rivington's part, for her chief occupation in life was planting arrows as often as she could in the weak spots in her friends' armour. Claudia could afford to smile serenely in reply. Did she not know whom Frank loved? A woman rather enjoys a clandestine love-affair, and Claudia hugged to herself her closer knowledge of Frank's inner life. She knew she was the core of it.

"Mr. Hamilton's in there now, talking to the Duchess of Roxford," continued Mrs. Rivington. "Ridiculous how artists are run after, isn't it? I don't suppose he was anyone in particular. Artists never are. Some people find that interesting, but I must say, personally, I prefer good breeding. So unmistakable. Good-bye. It's too dreadful about The Girlie Girl, but I was right, after all, wasn't I?"

Claudia stood quietly in the doorway until the violinist, the great Ysaye, had finished playing. There were many well-known people present, great names in the social and artistic firmaments, for Circe had always held a little court all her life, and she had cleverly managed to pursue her uneven way without offending any of the powerful social leaders, who, though they always remembered her trespasses against her, generously spoke with more or less indulgence of them. She was hated by a few, like Lady Currey, but they did not count for very much. Circe had never been actively malicious, and she had always been too immersed in her own affairs to find time to be inquisitive about other people's, hence she had acquired a certain reputation for fair dealing and generosity of character not altogether deserved. Now she very seldom entertained, but when she did so, she did it superlatively well, and many artists she had encouraged in their young and aspiring days were glad to do her honour.

The music stopped and she found Frank at her side.

"At last! I have been waiting for you all the afternoon.

I was afraid you were not coming. Claudia, this cannot go on. You are driving me mad. It is deliberate? Have you all the time just been playing with me?"

"Hush! don't be so indiscreet." She smiled, for Mrs. Rivington's words returned to her mind. Frank Hamilton attracted by Mrs. Jacob's money-bags! "I'll talk to you later. You shall get me some tea. I must go over and speak to mother."

She threaded her way, with handshakes and smiles, to where Circe, in a most exquisite frock, sat in a shaded corner, among a lot of scented cushions. She was talking with more animation than usual to a man whose back was towards Claudia. With her quick eye for beauty, she noticed that he had a particularly well-shaped head, which was finely set on his shoulders. Circe was talking in French to him.

"Eh bien, mon cher, Claudia est très belle, et elle est—"

Circe caught sight of her, and stopped short. Had it not been almost impossible, Claudia would have thought that her mother looked distinctly embarrassed and taken aback. Then the well-known sweet smile drifted over her still beautiful mouth, and the momentary impression vanished.

"Claudia, we were just talking of you. You are late, child. Let me introduce to you an old friend, Mr. Mavrocopoulos."

The man rose and bowed with unusual grace, and Claudia saw a very well-preserved man of about fifty-five, with black hair flecked with grey, and remarkably fine dark eyes. She returned his evident look of interest, and again she received a peculiar impression as of something that was vaguely familiar and yet somewhat dream-like. She was aware that Circe was watching them.

"Have I not met you before?" inquired Claudia. "Your face seems familiar to me, somehow."

Something flashed into his eyes, and his lips smiled as he turned to Circe.

"No, Claudia, I don't think you can remember Mr. Mavrocopoulos. He has not been in England for many years."

"But I saw you when you were a child of three," said the man. "I remember you well, very well. I do not pretend that I should have known you as that child, but I remember you well."

Claudia knew his name as that of a famous and very wealthy Greek family, and she recalled a rumour that had once linked it with her mother's. Had they found happiness together? Were there golden memories between them? She wondered curiously how a man and woman felt in such a case, who, after the lapse of many years, met again. Did yesterday seem as to-day? Was memory sharp or dulled by time, did they remember the high-water-mark of their passion, or the moment when they had said good-bye? Were they glad to meet again? If she and Frank met after many years, would they——? Then suddenly she heard Fay's voice saying confidently: "I know you wouldn't do the things I've done." But Circe had done them, too, and she had not had the excuse poor Fay could bring forward.

There were no signs of regret on her mother's face. She never spoke as one who finds any bitterness in the dregs of such a past. Indeed, she always spoke as one who felt that she had fulfilled her destiny, who has eaten stolen fruit joyously, without a scruple, without a fear. Her mother's contempt was for women who looked longingly over the hedge and were afraid to jump.

With a few more words Claudia left the two together.

Circe's slanting eyes, carefully made up, but in the shaded light still siren-like and magnetic, looked for some seconds into the eyes of the man beside her.

"She is like you, Demetrius, and she has always been my favourite," she murmured.

His only answer was to take her hand in his, and raise it to his lips.

"I return to Rome next week, but I take back with me a living picture, the incarnation of a dream."

Claudia was sipping the cup of tea that Frank had procured for her, when she bethought herself that she had not yet seen Patricia.

"Have you seen Pat? It is not humanly possible that she has tucked herself in a corner!"

His eyes were hungrily devouring her face, and lingering on her lips, so that she had the pleasant sensation of a secret caress. Mrs. Jacobs! How ridiculous!

"I saw her disappear half an hour ago in a conspirator-like manner with Mr. Colin Paton, into that room over there."

He pointed to a closed door, which was the door of the library.

"Nonsense. What have they got to conspire about?"

There was a little frown between her brows. Colin was *her* friend.

"Why do men and women usually conspire to be alone together?"

Without answering, Claudia crossed the hall, and abruptly turned the handle of the library-door.

Seated close together, talking very earnestly, Pat more excited than she had ever seen her, were the two whom Frank had seen disappear half an hour before. As a matter of fact, it had only been ten minutes, but Frank had always had his doubts of Colin's friendship.

"....bushels of apples and immense quantities of...." Pat was saying, when her sister came in. "Oh! Claudia, you have come. We'd almost given you up."

In an utterly different style from her own, Patricia was looking most attractive that afternoon. She had on a

soft white charmeuse gown, which showed the long lines of her figure, and clung around her in a manner calculated to send her admirers crazy. The cool nonchalant look which she usually wore had given place to something more intense, more human. Something seemed to have aroused her from her virginal slumber, and is not that brightness in the eyes, that flush on the cheek, generally aroused by a male? Claudia took all this in at a glance, and it was not till afterwards that she had time to reflect on the odd subject-matter of their earnest conversation.

"I wondered where you were," said Claudia, rather frigidly. "How do you do, Colin? I think mother wants you, Pat." It was a fib, but she had to explain her entrance.

Then she turned with a sweet but cold smile to Colin Paton, who had quietly risen.

"I hear you have written a great book and are going to become famous. Congratulations! I must buy a copy as soon as it comes out.... Frank, I want some more tea. I'm so thirsty."

Pachmann was playing as they made their way back to the tea-room, his fairy-like fingers lightly caressing the keys into exquisite joyousness.

"I want you to come to the studio to dinner next Monday," said Frank eagerly. "You always said you'd like to meet Henry Bridgeman and his wife if I could arrange it?" Claudia was a great admirer of Bridgeman's etchings. "Well, they are coming to dinner at the studio on Monday. Will you come too?"

"Of course, I shall be delighted," returned Claudia, not even troubling to think of her engagements. "I shall love it. And"—with a hard laugh—"I'll come for a sitting to-morrow if you like, before I go to Fay.... Dear, you mustn't say such things here. It's compromising." A loud chord on the piano, immediately fol-

lowed by the sound of a man's voice, made her raise a warning finger. "Hush!"

The words came clearly enough to both of them as they stood together.

"Ah! fill the Cup, what boots it to repeat,
How Time is slipping underneath our feet:
Better be jocund with the fruitful grape
Than sadden after none, or bitter fruit."

It was Liza Lehmann's setting, and the accompaniment thundered and rumbled, and then softened down to a plaintive, appealing melody. It might have been the voice of Circe herself, beckoning, alluring, promising....

"Ah! love, could you and I with Fate conspire
To grasp the sorry scheme of things entire
Would we...."

After all, why had she so many scruples? How did she come to be possessed of them? Why did she hesitate to grasp her happiness?

She looked up and found Colin Paton's eyes fixed upon her, and they wore an expression she did not know.

Then she heard Frank's voice murmuring in her ear. "Claudia, if you only knew how much I love you. If you would only trust yourself to me. Why are you afraid?"

"I don't know," she said truthfully, "I don't know."

She gave him a particularly tender smile, out of sheer feminine perverseness, impelled by something that rankled and festered within her. Colin Paton should be made to understand that there was at least one man who was a real friend to her, yes, and might be more.

"Turn down an empty Glass...."

Why not?

CHAPTER XVI

NATURE'S FAULT

CLAUDIA was leisurely dressing for the dinner *à quatre* at Frank's studio, leisurely, because there was something in the warm May air, stealing in through the windows, that made her dawdle and dream. She and Pat had motored out into the country that morning, and lunched at a quaint old inn covered with wistaria, just outside Penshurst, and the spell of the country, with its riot of scent and song, still possessed her. She thought of the hedges, with their tender greens; the young grass studded with gold and silver, for the buttercups and daisies were gaily blooming; the lilac in the cottage-gardens, just bursting into exquisite flower; the primroses with their pale beauty, nestling at the roots of the trees; the fruit blossom making a poem in delicate pinks and whites. She looked at the bowl of wild hyacinths she and Pat had gathered as excitedly as a couple of Cockney children, and she wished that she could have stayed in fairyland a little longer. She had been so happy for a few hours, for she loved the country. She had put away all the problems that beset her, and she had let the sweet perfection of Nature soothe her into something closely resembling peace. She had given

herself up to its healing, and she was still between it and noisy nerve-racking London as she donned her clothes. In accordance with her mood, she had chosen to wear a simple, almost girlish dress of faint pinks, that reminded her of the orchards they had passed through, and, as a finishing touch to remind her of their excursion, she pinned some primroses on her corsage. Their delicate perfume was like fresh honey.

Her maid noticed that she looked very young that night, with the dreams in her eyes and on her lips, even younger than her twenty-three years. Usually she looked much older, for her self-possessed manner, inherited from her mother, her dignified carriage and air of *savoir faire* might have belonged to a woman of twenty-eight. To-night she almost had the illusion that she was still an unmarried girl, with The Great Choice before her. The soft, warm air seemed to breathe love, to say, "Take your fill of its sweetness, your life is still to make." The impassioned song of the birds, the riot and colour, the bursting life in bud and blossom, what did it all say, but:

"Come, all lovers, to the feasting,
Where the wine of life is yeasting,
Soul of human, brute or flower,
This your purest, fullest hour
Drink your fill of Love's own brew."

Even Rhoda Carnegie's cynical words the previous evening at the Prime Minister's dinner-party seemed part of the day. "Is love to be confined within the small circlet of a wedding-ring? Why, it would be like trying to pour the sea into a thimble." After all, most intelligent people nowadays scoffed at the wedding-service, with its "forevers" and "till death." Those ideas had all been swept away.

As she rearranged the wild hyacinths for the mere pleasure of touching them, she asked herself if there still

lingered any belief in those "forevers." Honestly, no. She did realize that love is too big a thing to be confined within a wedding-ring. It was not that kind of scruple that held her back. Love, as she had once said before her marriage, was the only convention she owned. She recalled the words of James Hinton. "Love, and do as you please." Many people had taken this as their text for lax morality, but they had not understood him rightly. It was not an easy saying, but a hard one. Love! How often did one love in a lifetime? She had thought she loved Gilbert, and she really had at the time. But his neglect and coldness had killed her love. Could a great love be killed? Many waters cannot quench love—"was that not merely the high standard which we should all try and uphold, but can never attain to? An impossible standard, surely, except for rare, ethereal beings without sexual instincts, strong human needs.

"And I don't want an ethereal love," she said aloud.

The dachshund, who had been slumbering peacefully on the couch, awoke, and looked at her interrogatively. His faithful soul was afraid she had called him.

"Only talking to myself, Billiken," she said, smiling at him. "Why, even you, Billie—I am your little world, your sun and your moon and your stars, but you like me to stroke and pat you. Oh, Billie! I must be *first* with someone. I don't belong to anyone really, not of my own free will, and I want to so much, so much. I'm not strong enough to stand alone. I don't want to stand alone."

She was first with Frank, the only thing that mattered in his life. He had told her so often and often. Perhaps, yes, perhaps she would give herself to him, and make him happy, make herself happy. Stupid Jack had said that illicit relations with a man would never make her happy. But he was an ass, anyway. Why should not Frank make her happy? Why should Circe's daughter not be

happy as, apparently, her mother had been? Perhaps Circe had gone through a similar period of happiness and hesitation before she—— No, she could not honestly follow that line of argument. Her mother had only made a marriage of convenience, her father had never counted at all, and she knew instinctively, without any harsh judgment, that Circe had an entirely different nature from her own. There were no subtle shades of feeling in her mother, no understanding of intellectual and emotional heights. Claudia had discovered that as a child. Her mother never shared her enthusiasm for books or pictures, she would have looked with but languid interest that morning at the blue mist of the hyacinths stretching far away under the trees. Claudia had felt like shouting as she and Pat turned the corner and saw the beautiful carpet at their feet, but her mother would only have feared that she might be getting her feet damp on the grass. No, the example of Circe taught her nothing. They were mother and daughter, but they were different.

She went to the window and leaned out, looking up at the darkly blue sky and the steady stars, which watched in remote peacefulness over the traffic of Knightsbridge.

Her only justification now or at any time would be the strength of her love. She had her heritage of passion, but something that had not restrained her mother would always restrain her. Did she love Frank? He loved her, she never doubted that, but did she love him? She asked herself if the secrecy of such relationship would not harass her? Would the stolen meetings be the sweeter for the necessary secrecy, or would there not be a certain degradation in the whispered rendezvous? She could hear herself as a girl calling it, with fine youthful dogmatism, a "hole-and-corner" business. Did love save it from that reproach?

At the back of her Billie barked sharply, and withdrawing her head from the window, Claudia heard two

voices raised in unusual excitement outside her door. She went across to it and threw it open.

She just caught the end of a sentence spoken by her husband in his most dictatorial, angry tones. "...you can take a month's notice. I refuse to overlook the matter. I have enough affairs on my hands without keeping a man I cannot rely on. You can go."

The man, who was an excellent valet, answered with considerable conviction. "You did not tell me, sir. I know you did not. You may have thought you did, but you did not say anything about the suit-case."

The man went towards the servants' quarters, and Gilbert, turning, saw her in the doorway. His face was very unbeautiful in its anger. He looked almost apoplectic, his skin was so red and mottled. He had grown lately to look many years older than his age.

"Gilbert, did I hear you giving Marsh notice to go? He is such an excellent servant. What has he done?"

He came inside and sat down on the couch, breathing rather heavily. For a moment he seemed unable to answer.

"Forgot some instructions I gave him this morning, and then had the impertinence to say I never gave them. How"—irritably—"could I forget such an important thing?"

He was pulling himself together by an effort, but his mouth twitched.

"Was it very important?"

"Yes. I told him to send my dress-suit to my chambers. I was going down to a political dinner at Wynnstay"—Wynnstay was his father's home—"I thought the bag was there, and when I went to catch the train—Imbecile! Most important. I haven't told you. I expect to stand for Parliament shortly. Father finds the responsibility too much, and, of course, the seat is safe."

"But, Gilbert," expostulated Claudia, contrary to her

latter custom of listening, if not in agreement, in non-disagreement, "you have too much to do already. Don't you think——"

"Oh, don't rub it in, for heaven's sake.... Besides, I've promised Neeburg to take a holiday.... I'm certain I told Marsh about packing my clothes."

"He is usually very reliable."

"Oh, well! have it as you like. But *any* man with as many things to remember as I have, would be liable to forget—trifles. Doctors are so ridiculously bigoted." His face was slowly becoming an unhealthy white, the redness was fading away. He looked at her obviously asking her to agree with him. Neeburg *had* scared him a little....but Neeburg didn't understand the strain of a barrister's work. Claudia was only a woman and, of course, she wouldn't understand either.... No good trying to explain. A long sea voyage....six months' rest....ridiculous! A fortnight at Le Touquet would set him up....a man knew his own constitution best. But perhaps it was just as well he had been prevented from going to Wynnstay that evening.... He was a little tired. He would have an early dinner and go to bed by ten.

He became aware that she was regarding him in a critical, impersonal way, which, though he was relieved she had ceased to expect wildly enthusiastic responses to her exalté moods, somehow annoyed him. No woman, especially a wife, had any right to look so at a man.

"Why are you staring at me?" he asked, with a frown.

"I was wondering why Nature took the trouble to bring us together. I have been in the country all day, and there she seemed so gentle, so beneficent, so sympathetic. You felt like throwing yourself down among the daisies on the grass and saying, 'Take me, everything you do must be good and wise.' And in reality Nature is so cruel, so horribly cruel. Passion is Nature's greatest

force after self-preservation, and I wonder how many thousands of lives it ruins. I never realized until recently that 'Love is cruel as the grave' meant that."

"Are you blaming me for our marriage? I never persuaded you into it against your will."

"No. Nature persuaded me into it, and Nature made these soft, delicate primroses." She touched the flowers at her breast. "Surely it seems strange that so much gentle beauty and sordid cruelty should go hand-in-hand?"

He raised his thick, heavy eyebrows. He was feeling better now. Perhaps, after all, he would go down to the club on the chance of seeing Mathews about that case on Tuesday.

"Nature has only one object in bringing men and women together," he said slowly. Her words had reminded him of his father's and mother's grievance and hints. His father had mentioned it when he suggested giving up his seat in Parliament to him, and made it the text for a diatribe against the modern woman and her absent sense of duty. After all, his father was right. A man ought to have a son. "You know, Claudia, while we are speaking on this matter, my father and mother are very disappointed that——"

"Don't!" she said sharply, the girlish, wistful look gone from her face. "How can you talk about that—now. Have you no sense of delicacy—of—of decency——?" She drew in her breath with a jerk. "Don't ever speak again, please, of your parents' disappointment. I know you have always considered them before me, but this is the limit.... You don't love me—you never did love me. I will not bear children to a man who does not love me."

He shrugged his shoulders and rose from the sofa. She had turned away from him, only her back was visible. The dress was cut in a low, V-shaped opening,

and there were two pretty dimples that invited a man's kisses. But her husband did not notice them, he had never noticed them, and he saw only the back of a neurotic, unreasonable woman. He was going towards the door when she stopped him.

"Gilbert, do you remember that afternoon at Wargrave, when I asked you if I came first.... I asked if you loved me a great deal.... Why did you lie to me? Your work, your ambition, have always come first, and after the first few months of our marriage, I have meant nothing to you." She spoke quite calmly, with none of the heat and excitement she had shown on the night she had come back from the Rivingtons. "Gilbert, please answer a straight question. Why did you tell me that lie?"

"It wasn't a lie. I meant it. Only you women are so exacting and——"

She slowly inclined her head.

"I see. Perhaps you weren't aware at the time it was a lie. You never have analysed your emotions. You meant it—at the moment. Passion had got both of us by the throat. I loved you, but although I didn't realize it, passion blinded my eyes to your real character and how unsuitable we were to one another. And passion urged you on to marry me, when you ought to have married a nice, tame woman who would have been content with occasional crumbs. Oh! why does Nature bring the wrong people together! Why! Why! Gilbert, I wish we had been lovers instead of husband and wife, then—then the mistake would not have been irrevocable."

He was genuinely shocked. "Claudia, I would rather not listen to such things. Really, the licence women allow themselves nowadays—— I can't think how such ideas enter your head."

She smiled, with a touch of amusement as well as a tinge of sadness, as she answered him:

"All sorts of unorthodox ideas get into women's heads nowadays. I know you can't understand, and that's the trouble. You were made one way and I another, and then there came a whirlwind and threw us together." She held out her hand. "Don't let's quarrel any more. I begin to see things more clearly.... I was cheated by Nature, not by you. But....certain things you were—going to speak about, are quite impossible. Those days are gone for ever. We must each in our own way make the best of the remainder of our life.... Have you decided to go to Le Touquet at once?"

He was puzzled by her new attitude and the calmness of the frank brown eyes that confronted him.

"Yes, I promised Fritz to get away as soon as possible. I've asked Colin to go over with me. I knew you wouldn't want to leave town just now, at the beginning of the season." He had not considered the possibility of her going with him, but something in her new, almost friendly, attitude, made him add the last sentence.

"I will come if you wish it, Gilbert."

He hesitated. She played golf much better than he. So did Colin, but that was different. The primitive man was strong in Gilbert.

"I think it's hardly worth while disarranging your plans. You've got heaps of engagements, haven't you?"

"Yes, but——"

"If Colin can come, we'll just take it quietly; golf all day and go to bed early. A fortnight of that will soon pick me up. Later on in the summer we'll go for a holiday together."

"Very well."

He went towards the door again, and Claudia picked up a light wrap for her shoulders. She would be rather late for Frank's dinner-party.

At the door he fidgeted with the handle and finally turned to her. "Perhaps I did forget to tell Marsh,

Claudia. Smooth him over, will you? You're good at that kind of thing. Tell him that—er—I've come to the conclusion that—he didn't hear me."

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask him why he did not tell Marsh himself. Then she remembered her new-born resolution, and let him go his own road.

"I'll see what I can do in the morning. Good-night, Gilbert."

CHAPTER XVII

THE GREAT THRESHOLD

THE small dining-room of Frank's studio-flat had that cosy, friendly air that only a small room can achieve. That there was little more space than was occupied by the table laid for four only seemed to increase the pleasantness of the apartment, which was lit by four red candles in old pewter candlesticks on the table. Their red shades confined the circle of light to the white tablecloth, and allowed the rest of the room to appear pleasantly soft and vague. An enormous bowl of red roses filled the centre of the table, and some of their broken petals were scattered over the cloth, while an Eastern scarf of some filmy material shading from orange to blood-red was loosely disposed with an air of artistic negligence around the centre bowl.

Frank Hamilton looked down at his handiwork and found it good. But still he fidgeted with the back of a chair as he surveyed it, and his eyes were bright with some mental or physical excitement. He was not often restless, but to-night his nerves were evidently on edge. His teeth gnawed his lower lip and his eyes constantly sought the clock.

Then, after giving a last touch to the table, he pulled out a bunch of keys from his pocket and unlocked a

corner cupboard where he kept liqueurs and wines. He never forgot to lock that cupboard, no matter how late his company left or how high his visions had soared, for he had a great mistrust of servants. His usual manner was half dreamy, rather abstracted, as though the sordid details of everyday life passed him by, but the impression that he gave was misleading. Often his mind was most practical when his eyes seemed only to hold vague dreams and beautiful, unworldly ideals, and if anyone thought to drive an easy bargain at such a time he found himself mistaken. As a child at school Frank had always managed to elude just punishment by that same manner of aloofness from desks and copybooks, and from quite early manhood women had taught him to realize how that air, combined with obvious good looks and the reputation for "temperament," could be made valuable. The way in which his eyes would light up with sudden enthusiasm, the frank expressions of admiration which came easily to his lips, the appeal which he made by a seemingly exclusive devotion to the woman of the moment, had always made him a favourite with the fair sex, who contrasted him with the more phlegmatic males of their acquaintance to his great advantage, for "it's the high-falutin stuff the women bite on."

Men did not like Frank Hamilton, and he was seldom seen in their company. A few artists dropped in on him occasionally to talk "shop," but they were never heard to speak of him with any enthusiasm. Indeed, among them he had the reputation for being "close," and that happy-go-lucky, jovial crowd that lends and borrows with equal ease found this unforgivable. He was not willing to "part," nor did he try to put commissions in their way, and lately, as de Bleriot had been heard to say at the Chelsea Arts Club, "Hamilton's getting altogether too big for his boots."

After Frank had put the liqueurs on the sideboard,

he noticed that the card which had been attached to the bunch of roses he had just arranged had fallen to the ground. He picked it up and re-read it with a little smile of amusement.

"To the greatest of artists and my dear friend. M.J."

With a laugh, he tore it up into fragments and threw the pieces in the fire. "Maria Jacobs! Maria Jacobs! Well, the roses have come in handy"—mockingly—"thank you, Maria."

As the last fragment was consumed, the door-bell rang, and he went out into the hall to receive his visitor.

"I am afraid I am a little late," apologized Claudia, letting him take her cloak, "but—— Oh, well! the Bridgemans are later, it seems, so I shan't apologize any more."

He drew her into the dining-room and kissed her.

"Don't! You are crushing the poor primroses. Are they not sweet? Don't you love the frailty and delicate sweetness of wild flowers?"

She was very sweet herself as she said it, her eyes taking in approvingly the decorations of the table. But she was also to him still a little *grande dame*, with her dignified carriage and her head held high. For a moment doubt knocked at his confident heart. It would all depend how she took his news. The next few minutes would decide his fate.

"Claudia, I have a disappointment for you. I have just had a wire from the Bridgemans. She is ill and they cannot come." He was watching her narrowly, although the words were spoken easily enough. "There was no time to get another couple. The wire arrived a few minutes ago. You can see the table is set for them. Do you mind, dearest?"

For a moment she hesitated. She had a curious sudden

feeling of fright, like someone who sees a gate closing behind her.

"Of course," he said lightly, "it's not quite *comme il faut*, but neither you nor I care about that, do we? We will go to a restaurant if you prefer. It's a pity the Bridgemans didn't let me know sooner."

The room was very cozy and inviting. The situation was compromising; but then, as Frank said, did she care about small conventionalities? No one would know. It was only Mother Grundy who would drive them forth to a noisy, rag-time restaurant where they would hardly be able to hear one another speak. The country air had made her agreeably tired, so that the mellow light of the candles and the room perched high above the traffic appealed to her mood. Had he made the least attempt to persuade her she would not have stayed, but he was wise enough to make it seem a matter of indifference where they dined so long as they were together.

"I'm tired of the clatter of restaurants," she said, sinking into a chair by the hearth; "and I smell a smell of savoury baked meats. It's very peaceful here at night."

"Marshall isn't at all a bad cook," returned Frank lightly, "and I told her to think out a specially nice dinner."

"For the Bridgemans or—for me?"

The momentary sensation of panic had passed. He was just as he always was, devoted, deferential, entirely at her command.

"For the Bridgemans, or course. Need you ask?" He took the pretty arm lying on the arm of the chair and let his lips gently slip along the skin from the elbow to the wrist. "Claudia, I can't think of anyone but you these days."

"Just an infatuation!" she laughed provocatively, a thrill running through her.

"Are you sorry that I am so infatuated? Would you have me more cool and reasonable? You told me once that you hated tepid people. Have you changed your ideas?"

"No."

"Then why—— Ah! here is the soup. *Madame est servie*. Will she graciously adorn this chair?"

"How charming! It's Jacobean, isn't it? I shall enjoy sitting in it."

Part of the face was in shadow, but the light fell full on the soft, curving lips, very sweet and gracious to-night, the firm, well-moulded chin, and the exquisite line of the bare neck and shoulders.

"Do you know any of the other tenants in the building, Frank?" she asked over her soup.

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Colin Paton knows an architect further down, Leonard Gost. I wonder if you knew him too."

Frank shook his head. "No, but I happened to hear this morning that he had been suddenly taken ill. The doctor came here by mistake. Don't let's talk about Paton."

"Why? Don't you like him?"

"I'm jealous of every man you even see. That day I came in and found him holding your hand I could have slain him."

She smiled, and then the smile suddenly vanished and was replaced by a more thoughtful expression.

"Are you, then, jealous of my husband?" she asked suddenly.

The question was unexpected, and for a moment he had no answer ready.

"Why, yes; of course, I——"

"No, I see you are not. How curious! I think if I were in love with a married woman I should be morbidly jealous of her husband. My imagination would torture me, the grey matter in my brain would turn a

bright orange with jealous hate." She had never spoken to him of her relations with her husband. He had never asked any questions, and she had volunteered no information. But sometimes she had wondered that Frank could take his existence and rights so calmly.

"But you do not love him," objected Frank; "if you loved him I should hate him."

"I did love him—once."

"A man who has failed to keep his wife's love deserves to lose it," said Frank glibly, who was opening the champagne.

"Frank, you say you love me. Suppose I said I was tired of the life I lead, that there is something in me that shrinks from deception, that I like all the cards on the table. Would you take me away?"

The cork popped loudly at the moment, and he had to quickly pour some of the champagne into her glass.

"Darling, I should only be too proud. You ought to know that."

Was it his preoccupation with the champagne, or was there something wrong with his tone or his words? What had she expected him to say? Then she pulled herself together with a laugh.

"To love is human, to marry—sometimes divine. Don't be afraid, *mon ami*. I'm not cut out for those heroics, or," she added, "you either."

He was inwardly relieved, for a man could never be sure what a highly-strung, emotional woman like Claudia would expect of him. She was adorable, she was well-born and clever, but—no, he was not cut out for "heroics." As much as he could be, he was desperately in love with her; it was perfectly true that the thought of her obsessed his days and nights. But love to him was a pleasant thing, a serious light-mindedness in which a little pretence was necessary on either side. They might sigh together over the impossibility of spending

their lives together; they might regret that they had not met before she entered into the legal compact; they might even indulge in rosy dreams of a future if she "ever became free," but they would be very careful not to endanger her reputation or cause her spouse to set her free. Bourgeois born, reared among ideals of hypocritical respectability, Frank Hamilton had secretly a horror of anything *outré*, such as the Divorce Court. It would probably make very little difference to his career as an artist, but his innate conventionality revolted at the thought.

"If you would trust yourself to me, I would try and prove worthy of your bounty," he said humbly. "My dearest, you wring my heart by these doubts of me. Don't you *yet* believe in my love?"

She was playing with the wing of a chicken.

"How can one tell love from passion? Do you know?"

"I'll ask you a question. Do you believe that love between a young normal woman and man can exist without passion?"

His eyes challenged hers over the deep red roses. There was a little flush on her creamy cheeks now, and the primroses were fading whitely at her breast. There was a current of electricity in the little room going from him to her. She fancied she could almost hear the beating of the wings.

"No, passion must be part of love."

"And you wouldn't care for a man who was content merely to love you at a respectful distance? No, you needn't answer. I know you wouldn't. You're much too alive for that. You are much too passionate. A placid, hold-my-hand love would never make you happy.... Shall we have coffee upstairs in the studio?"

She nodded. The atmosphere of the little room seemed to have become too close. She was aware that her cheeks were burning.

She knew that she stood on the Great Threshold. It was only fair to Frank that she should decide to-night. She knew by this time enough of men to realize that self-repression, self-control are foreign to their nature and upbringing. She was content, or she could have forced herself to be content, with the indefinite relations between them. Something urged her across the threshold, and yet something that she could not grasp or define held her back. She remembered a phrase from a play she had seen a few days previously, in which a man had spoken of "woman's innate purity." Could she lay claim to such a possession? Clearly, no. She had dallied with the idea, she had let Frank kiss her time and again without any repugnance. A pure-minded woman would have repulsed him at the outset. She would have said, "I am a married woman. Only my husband has a right to my caresses."

"I have forgotten the cigarettes. I'll run down for them, if you'll excuse me a minute."

She nodded as she made herself comfortable on the low divan covered with cushions.

The Great Threshold! Her heart beat faster as she contemplated it. She wondered in what fashion the married women she knew had stepped across it—gaily, impulsively, with reckless abandonment, with inward shrinking, with cool deliberation—how? La Rochefoucauld once said, "Some ladies may be met with who never had any intrigue at all, but it will be exceedingly hard to find any who have had one and no more," but then, he was only a maxim-monger, and the making of maxims, like the making of epigrams, is only a trick. If she crossed it, there would only be Frank. They would love one another secretly, and the stolen hours together would make her barren life more tolerable. Jack had made out that *liaisons* were nothing more than licentious flirtations. If two people really loved—

Moved by a restless spirit, she rose and went over to the mantelpiece. Her eyes fell with a start on a visiting-card inscribed COLIN PATON.

Her hands fell nervelessly to her sides. Somehow there seemed a third person in the room. Frank came back and handed her the box of cigarettes.

She indicated the card.

"Mr. Paton—has been here?.... Thank you."

"Yes. I asked him to come some time, and he came to-day. He said he wanted to see how your portrait was getting on."

"What did he say about it?"

"I didn't show it to him," said Frank, with a touch of arrogance. "Besides, it isn't quite finished, and no artist likes to expose an unfinished picture."

"It's practically finished. I needn't come any more for it?"

"We won't tell people it's finished," he whispered, close to her ear. "We will pretend it is still only half-finished."

The words jarred, and she drew away from him. Yet he was quite right. If she crossed the threshold, she must in future take refuge in such subterfuges. She must lie to everyone, to honest Pat, to Colin Paton—Her brows met in a frown. Could love thrive in such an atmosphere? Frank seemed to have thought the whole thing out, counted on her surrender—How dared he?—and yet—She had certainly encouraged him, there was no gainsaying that.

"Let us look at the picture again," she said abruptly. "I'd like to see it by nightlight."

With a smile he complied, classing her with the other vain women who had sat to him. She wanted to look on her own beauty. He pulled forward the easel and took off the cloth.

It was one of the best bits of painting he had ever

done. He had worked hard on it, and it had but slightly the faults that usually marred his work. He had put in careful, conscientious brush-work; and in combination with the arresting individuality of the sitter, the result was one of which he might justly be proud.

But as Claudia gazed on it, dissatisfaction stirred within her. The yellowish lights—the electric globes were of some daffodil tint—made her see it as she had never done before. The eyes were surely too ardent, the curve of the lips too sensual, the whole face had a curious voluptuousness that made her recoil from the picture. Did she give people that impression?

“Is it—exactly like me?” she asked.

“It’s as I see you,” he said complacently. “My beautiful Claudia! It is good, isn’t it? I think it will create a sensation when it is exhibited.”

Suddenly she knew that she hated it, that she did not want the world to see it, to stare at it, to comment on it. Yes, she was glad Colin had not seen it. He might have thought——

“I don’t like it.”

If she had suddenly held a pistol at his head he could not have been more surprised. He turned from his very self-satisfied contemplation of the picture and stared at the original. And it was not the woman of the portrait he saw, nor the flushed, hesitating woman of the dinner-table, but a woman whose eyes were wide open and startled, as though some new aspect of life had struck her; a woman who was fighting for self-mastery, calling to her aid that pride and moral fastidiousness that were innate in her, and which lately she had been trying to keep out of sight.

She was not the woman, she told herself, she never would be the woman of the picture. That was not a woman with true love and passion in her eyes, it was mere animal sensuality. Yet she was aware that she

might become that woman if she crossed the threshold. Dare she take the risk? Did she want to take the risk?

"I don't understand."

She had never heard him speak so angrily. Yes, he was really angry. His artistic pride was wounded.

"It's very clever, very clever," she stammered, "but I—I don't like the way you have depicted me. It isn't the nicest—me."

His eyes were very light and very cold as he faced her, and suddenly they seemed to be bright and shallow, like those of a bird. His lips made a thin red line, and a hardness of the lines of the jaw became noticeable.

"Frank, don't you understand?" she pleaded. "There, in the picture, you have made me an *amoureuse*, *une grande amoureuse*, and I—I don't think I'm really that." Then a little wildly—"It may be in me, I may have it in my blood, but I don't want it to come out.... I'm sorry, Frank, but I don't like it."

She saw, as she looked in his face, that he did not understand, that she could never make him understand. She had mortally wounded his pride. He would never forgive the thrust.

Without a word he noisily pushed back the easel. Mechanically she sank down on the divan again, and as she disturbed one of the cushions, a piece of paper became uncovered. Before she realized that it might be private, her eyes had taken in the wording. It was the Bridgemans' telegram—"Sorry wife ill. Cannot come to-morrow. BRIDGEMAN."

With a last kick the easel was lodged in its place against the wall. She put the cushion over the telegram again, as he came back to the centre of the room like a sulky child, a cigarette drooping at the corner of his mouth.

"You're extremely difficult to please," he said sarcastically. "I'm glad all my sitters are not so particular."

"You can't say I haven't done full justice to your looks."

That was all he could make out of her explanation, her confession! It was a shock, but it had the effect of steadying her. Her voice was very quiet and composed as she replied:

"If you don't mind, Frank, I won't have the picture exhibited. After all, a portrait is a personal thing. Send it home to me as soon as it is finished." She wanted to add "and I will send you a cheque for it," but she was afraid of hurting his feelings. Nothing had ever been said about payment. It had been tacitly assumed that it was a labour of love.

"I don't think it's fair to me," he protested, still sulky, the man submerged in the artist. "It's the best picture I have ever done. No woman can judge her own portrait. Besides, you never objected to it before."

"I always saw it quite close at hand and in the light of day. To-night, at the end of the room, it looks different."

"Well, commend me to women-sitters for changeability!" he exclaimed bitterly.

She put her hand on the cushion that concealed the telegram. He had evidently been sitting in her position when it arrived.

"Perhaps—if the Bridgemans had come—they might have liked it, and their opinion is more valuable than mine. You only heard of her illness this evening?"

"Yes," he responded moodily, "just before you came in."

Petty trickery! She had nearly lent herself to that. Afterwards—yes, circumstances might have made it necessary, but before—— It was not, and it never could have been, love on either side. Love was a bigger, finer thing than that! Perhaps too large always to be confined within a wedding-ring, but this did not of itself overleap the bounds. Only the trickster passion again!

And passion she had proved to be a cheat, a miserable, mean cheat, that preyed on the emotions and ignorance of women.

She suddenly felt very tired, and her face had gone pathetically white as she rose from the divan.

"Frank, I am sorry I have hurt your feelings. I can only say again that I admire it as a piece of painting, immensely.... Now I must go home. It is getting rather late, and I think a day in the country tires one, don't you?"

Suddenly the *man* overcame the vanity of the artist. His eyes changed, and before she could stop him he had crushed her in his arms.

"Never mind about the picture....it's you I want and *must have*.... I love you to distraction.... Claudia, you can't hesitate any longer.... It's Kismet, stronger than both of us."

She knew it would only be an unseemly scuffle if she struggled, a scuffle that would abase her pride still further. She remained cold and lifeless in his arms, until at last he released her and looked into her face with alarm.

"Claudia, you're not going—you shan't go——"

"Frank," she said clearly, but without an atom of fear in her eyes, "I apologize to you. I know I've what you men call 'encouraged you.' You have the right to be angry with me, only if you love me—don't.... I—I thought I could.... I am very unhappy.... I didn't know myself until to-night.... There's something that won't let me cross the threshold.... I'm not good, and I'm not afraid of convention, but I can't do it.... I should wake up to hate myself. It's as well I found out in time—for you and for me."

"You say you're not afraid. You *are* afraid," he said.

"I said I was not afraid of convention. It's true I am afraid of something—in myself. I thought it was an

easy game to play. Now I wonder how a woman can play it.... Let me go now, Frank. I'm very tired."

"You don't love me?"

"No....not that way?"

Her quiet voice, her steady eyes, frightened him. He knew he was playing a losing game, and he began to bluster.

"You would love me....you practically promised me everything....you've just amused yourself with me, like other women in your set....you run up an account, and you don't pay the bill....if you were a man I should call it damned dishonourable, but as you are a woman——"

She stooped and drew forth the telegram.

"And if I were a man, what should I call this?"

The paper dropped from her hand and fluttered to the ground, where it lay between them.

"It was through love of you," he said desperately. "You shilly-shallied....women always have ridiculous scruples.... I swear it was through love of you. You've driven me out of my wits."

She shook her head. There was no anger on her lips, only a drooping sadness.

"I wonder if that's all a man's love can ever mean I wonder! Good-night, Frank. Let's close this chapter—friends. There have been faults on both sides."

She held out her hand, but he turned away and flung himself on the divan with his head in his cushions.

She waited a moment, and then she went out of the door and down the stairs that led to the living-rooms below. Surely he would see her out? Would not Mrs. Marshall think it curious that she should depart in such an odd fashion? What a ludicrous finish to the evening!

The hall below was in darkness. She could see no light from the region of the kitchen. Was that, too, part of

his experienced manœuvring? She shivered, and groped for the electric switch. After some time she found it. Her cloak was lying on one of the hall chairs.

Was he going to let her depart alone? How would she get a taxi? It was half past eleven. Oh! how tired she felt now. Her feet seemed leaden as she slipped the cloak round her shoulders. She cast one more glance up at the door of the studio. But it remained closed. His manners, with his hopes of her favours, had forsaken him. There had been something in Rhoda Carnegie's remarks, after all.

She opened the hall-door, and found the stone stairs only very dimly lit. She went heavily down them, forgetting that she might have summoned the lift. Her soft pink dress trailed after her, for she was too tired to hold it up. How unending the stairs were! Would she ever get to the bottom? How many flights was it—six?

It seemed to her that she had been plodding down the stairs for ages, when suddenly a hall-door opened just as she was rounding a turn of the staircase. A voice said quietly, "I'll come in to-morrow morning to see how he is getting on."

She had unconsciously shrunk back against the wall among the shadows, but at the recognition of his voice she exclaimed, she thought in a whisper, "Colin!"

He stopped in the act of running down the stairs, and came back. But now she had no volition left to move backwards or forwards. He groped up the stairs, and saw the gleam of a diamond spray on her corsage. He went nearer and saw her.

"Claudia! . . . Claudia!" The first "Claudia" was pure astonishment, but the second held something more, something that seemed to match the look in his eyes when he had been watching her flirting with Frank at her mother's "at home."

"Colin," she said pitifully, "I'm so tired....take me home....please, take me home...."

She stumbled a little, and he quietly put her hand through his arm.

"It's not worth summoning the lift....it's only two flights; lean on my arm."

She leaned more heavily than she knew, for all her spirit had gone, her springy step had deserted her, her head drooped sideways.

Luckily there was a taxi passing, and in a few minutes she found herself beside him on the narrow seat. For a moment she sat motionless, hardly realizing his presence. Then, with a childish impulse for comfort, she put her head on his shoulder, and commenced to sob.

"Colin, don't think things.... I want to explain...."

His hand closed firmly over her cold one, cold, though the night was quite hot.

"Claudia, don't....there's no need....what are friends for?"

CHAPTER XVIII

DRUNK AND DISORDERLY

CLAUDIA had slept but little that night, her thoughts going over the scene in the studio again and again, sometimes accusing herself, sometimes wondering at herself. One fact stood out clearly. Frank had not loved her, nor she him. What had Colin thought when he found her crouching on the stairs? She had offered to explain—but what could she have said?

With weary eyes and pale cheeks she took the letters from her maid's hand. She was almost too tired to open them, but as the letters fell loosely on the coverlet, she saw one in Colin's handwriting. With her heart beating fast, she picked it up and tore it open. For a moment she forgot that it had probably been posted before he brought her home from the studio.

A letter and some printed matter fell out. She picked up the printed matter first. It was a page proof of a book, containing a dedication to herself. She read it with a queer feeling, but her apathy had gone.

“TO MY FRIEND, CLAUDIA CURREY,

whose sympathy and friendship have inspired me to put down on paper some facts I have been able to

gather, together with some purely personal views on that most baffling and fascinating of all subjects—sociology. I beg her to accept the dedication of this book, with all its faults and shortcomings, of which the author is painfully aware, in memory of our many talks about ‘humans.’”

Her eyes filled with tears, and she could hardly read the letter that accompanied the page.

“MY DEAR CLAUDIA,” it ran, “I was horribly disappointed, childishly disappointed the other day when you told me you had heard about my forthcoming book. I think you must have got it from some inside source, for it is not yet announced to the public. I wanted the enclosed to be a surprise to you, and now the squib won’t go off! I asked and obtained Gilbert’s permission to put in this little dedication, because you really did inspire it. You always liked people who ‘did things,’ and your interest in life and ‘humans’ quickened mine. How dare you say you will order a copy as soon as it is out? You *know* you’ll get an advance copy, the very first. I do hope you will like it, at least, a little. Now it is in print, I realize what a little I have been able to say on a vast subject. All I can say in extenuation is, I’ve done my best, though perhaps I don’t deserve any marks for that. But it’s such a huge field to try and cover. Do you remember when you asked me for a book on the subject and I gave you Lecky’s ‘History of European Morals’? I’ve always been cheered by your remark after reading it. ‘Only a Methusaleh could hope to come to any definite conclusions, and then he might be ready to lie down and die!’

“There are no definite conclusions in my book, because I try hard to keep my mind plastic. Some day, when I’m a greybeard with stooping shoulders and several deaf ears, perhaps I’ll do something better.

"I'm sending you a new 'Lear Nonsense' book. Rather jolly, I think. Do look at the picture of the German and the baby who is *gedropfen*.

"Always your admiring friend,

"COLIN PATON."

The other letters lay unheeded. She dropped back among the pillows, and there was no movement of the head, or even the hand in which lay the letter. She might have been asleep.

But when her maid, whose face betokened hesitation and perplexity, came in quietly, Claudia turned and opened her dark eyes. There were no tears in them, only a burning, unfathomable look which, though it envisaged Johnson clearly, did not notice her perturbed face.

"Madam, I——" began Johnson, clearing her throat. "Did the master tell you he would not be coming home last night?"

Claudia came back from a remote distance.

"Last night? No. He was only going to his club, I believe. Why, has he not slept in the flat?"

"No, madam, and he did not say anything about stopping out to Marsh, and he didn't have his bag packed. He thought he had told Marsh to pack it for him to go down to Wynnstay, but Marsh says——"

"Yes, I remember. Perhaps he went down to Wynnstay, after all, rather late." It had never happened before that Gilbert had been away from the flat without informing her or the servants; but Claudia saw nothing remarkable in the oversight.

"Marsh thought so too, madam, and he got a trunk call through to Wynnstay, but he has not been there, and then he telephoned the club and—and they told him Mr. Currey was there last night and left about twelve o'clock. I—we thought we had better mention it, madam."

Claudia was roused to attention this time. Where

could Gilbert have got to after he left the club? There were some wives, she knew, who would have dismissed the matter with a shrug of their shoulders, but she had no complaint of Gilbert on that score. Perhaps he would have been more human and companionable had he had some of the weaknesses of the flesh.

She looked at the clock. It was half-past nine. He was generally down at his chambers soon after nine.

"Was he in evening-dress, Johnson, when he went out last night?"

"Yes, madam; Marsh said he changed before he went out, and told him he was going to bed early, as he had a big case on to-day and wanted to be fresh for it."

Johnson looked at her for instructions, but Claudia knit her brows in perplexity. It was very curious, but it did not occur to her that there was anything seriously wrong. He must have gone home with some friend and turned in for the night. And yet—he had never done any such thing. He was essentially a man of routine and order.

"I don't think there is anything to be done, Johnson," said Claudia, after a little thought. "Probably they will ring up from his office to say he has arrived all right. Ring them again and ask them to telephone immediately Mr. Currey comes in. And bring my coffee, please."

But when she had finished her coffee and toast there was still no word from the office, except that they had rung up rather agitatedly to know if Mrs. Currey had any idea where he could be found. By this time Claudia had become impressed with the idea that something was wrong. One was always hearing of motor accidents nowadays. Could anything of the kind have happened to Gilbert?

Instinctively she turned to Colin Paton in the emergency. After they had silently bade one another good-bye last night she had thought she could never face

him again, for if he did not think the worst of her he must have guessed that there had been some kind of a scene that had upset her. And on the top of it all his charming letter.

But this happening made her put her own *affaires du cœur* on one side. If anything had happened to Gilbert, Colin would be able to find it out. She hardly realized how blind her faith in Colin was. She went to the telephone in her dressing-gown and called him up.

"Colin! Oh! I am so glad you are there. I don't know whether I ought to be alarmed or not, but Gilbert has not been home since eight o'clock last night, and he is not at the office. He took no suit-case out with him, and he was seen to leave the club at twelve o'clock. What ought I to do?"

He answered her quite quietly, asking a few more questions; but she knew his voice so well by now that she realized that he did not consider her an alarmist in ringing him up.

"Don't worry. I'll go to the club and make some inquiries, and telephone you later. Leave it to me."

"What do you think——?" she began timidly

"I don't know. But we must find him. I'll keep in touch with you. Don't be alarmed, Claudia."

"Thank you," she replied humbly. "You—you are always very good to me."

There was a slight pause at the other end. "Don't talk nonsense. When will you learn the meaning of friendship?"

She went back to her dressing feeling more comforted, for the mere fact of having confided a trouble to him always seemed to halve it. He was essentially a man who inspired confidence, and Claudia wondered vaguely, as she brushed her hair, why some men were like that and others were not. His opinion was always sought after by his friends and acquaintances, and yet he never gave

it in any ponderous spirit. Sometimes he replied with a joke, or a happy allusion, but he gave an answer all the same. This reminded her of Patricia, who had said enthusiastically a few days previously, "He's the most helpful man I ever knew." Lately Pat had seen a good deal of him, and one or two people had remarked on it to Claudia, saying, "Is Pat going to settle down at last?"

Was Colin Paton in love with Pat? What else could be the meaning of their frequent meetings and that seclusion in the library? She, Claudia, was only a great friend, and the little prick of jealousy she acknowledged to her self that she felt was natural to women where their men friends were concerned. All women hated losing their men friends by marriage. And—yes—Pat would make a charming wife if she fell in love.

It was eleven o'clock—Gilbert's case was on—and he had made no appearance. This much had just been telephoned from his office. Claudia was sure now that something was seriously amiss. For Gilbert to neglect his work, some accident must have happened.

She felt a restless desire to do something, to search for him herself; but what could she do? Where could he be? Could he be lying in one of the great hospitals, unable to give an account of himself?

Johnson came hurrying in. "Madam, Mr. Paton is on the telephone and wants to speak to you."

Claudia flew to the receiver.

"Claudia, is that you? It's all right, I've got him safe and sound. No, he's not hurt. I'll tell you more when I see you. I am bringing him back now. It's a case of complete loss of memory; spent the night in the police cells as a drunk and disorderly—he must have been very excited. He is still dazed and suspicious of everyone. Don't show there is anything amiss. Keep quite calm, and telephone Dr. Neeburg."

Gilbert locked up in the police-cells as drunk and disorderly! It was unbelievable! It was too ironic! Though she no longer loved him, her heart was touched by pity for him. He must have known where he was, although he could not remember his name. What an awful time he must have had!

But she immediately rang up Fritz Neeburg, who, she noted, did not seem startled at the news. He said he would come immediately. "I was afraid of something like this, Mrs. Currey," he concluded.

The strong constitution of which Gilbert had always boasted had given way. His pride would be in the dust. It would mean giving up work for some time. It meant a very bad break.

Claudia was appalled when she saw the man who got out of the taxi with Colin. No man looks well after a night spent in his clothes, but Gilbert's appearance had a wildness and dishevelment which was as much due to the brain as the body. His eyes were bloodshot, there was a strong growth of hair on his chin which showed conspicuously, his shirt-front was rumpled and crushed as she had never seen any front, his mouth kept twitching and his walk was unsteady. But Claudia controlled her alarm and went forward with a smile.

"You'll like some breakfast, won't you, Gilbert? Marsh has got some nice hot coffee for you in the dining-room."

Neeburg had not arrived, and she had not known what preparations to make, but she wanted to appear natural.

Gilbert looked at her with a curious indifference; she could not make out if he knew her or not.

"I think you'd like a bath first, old man, wouldn't you?" said Colin cheerfully. "And some fresh clothes. This garb is unseemly in the morning."

He allowed Colin to lead him up the stairs, and in a few minutes Neeburg arrived and went after him.

In half an hour the two men came down together. "We've put him to bed, Mrs. Currey," said Neeburg, "with a sleeping-draught. He'll probably sleep twelve hours or so. That's the best thing for him at present. He may wake up with his mind quite clear. It's a case of mental aphasia, due to nerve-strain. I've given him the clearest warnings time after time. I'm very sorry, but he has brought it on himself."

"He had made up his mind to go to Le Touquet next week," said Claudia. She looked at Colin. "You were going with him, were you not?"

"He asked me, and I was trying to make arrangements. Can he go, doctor, as soon as he recovers a little?"

"The sooner the better. I'm glad you're going with him. Keep him out in the open all day, and don't let him talk or think about his work. Let him play golf, and keep him out of doors until he falls asleep directly he gets into bed. No stimulants whatever. Has he been sleeping badly lately, Mrs. Currey?"

"Yes, he told me he seldom got to sleep till late in the morning."

"Madness! Sheer madness to neglect such warnings. Paton, I'll have a talk with you before he goes. How did you find him?"

"I got Carey Image to go the rounds of the hospitals in case it was an accident, and I went myself to all the police-stations. As a matter of fact, someone had just recognized him as I arrived at Bow Street. As far as I can make out, he took a stiff hot whiskey at the club before leaving—he told the waiter he thought he had a cold coming on—and went out into the night air. Owing to the taxi strike there were no cabs about, and after waiting a few minutes, Gilbert said he would walk."

"And the fresh air on top of the hot whiskey finished him," commented Neeburg. "Was he very violent?"

"So the policeman said. He thought it was an ordinary

case of drunk and disorderly. He could hardly articulate, and couldn't say where he lived or his name. The policeman says the more he tried to say it the more violent he became, and, as it happens, there was nothing in his pockets to identify him. He spent the night in an ordinary lock-up. It wasn't the fault of the police."

"I hope this won't get in the papers," said Claudia thoughtfully. "You know how Gilbert would feel that, Colin; can you——?"

"I'll try. I must go now. Ring up Pat and ask her to come and be with you. Good-bye, Neeburg; I'll ring you up and fix an appointment...." He turned to Claudia. "You were splendid when he came in. It must have been rather a shock to you."

"Splendid! Colin, don't laugh at me. I'm the least splendid of women. I ought not to accept that dedication. Take it out. I'm not worth it. If—if I don't break all the sins in the Decalogue, it's because—yes, I suppose it's because I'm a coward."

She lifted her eyes miserably to his, and at what she read in his some of the anguish and self-abasement in her heart was softened. For a few moments they stood silent, only their eyes speaking.

"Colin," she whispered, her finger-tips playing with his coat, "do you still believe in me—after—last night?"

"If you told me with your own lips that you *had* committed all the sins in the Decalogue, I should not believe you. I think I know you, Claudia, better than you know yourself, and I believe in you more than you believe in yourself.... I shall be back in the afternoon, in case you want me."

He was gone, but Claudia went upstairs with a load taken off her heart. She did not try to analyse the meaning of it, she only knew that the sting had been taken out of her folly.

CHAPTER XIX

AN AMIABLE STUFFED ANIMAL

IDON'T understand it," said Lady Currey, in tones of extreme annoyance, "my husband never had a nervous breakdown."

She was lunching *tête-à-tête* with Claudia at the flat, for she and her husband had quartered themselves most considerably upon her directly they had heard of Gilbert's illness. Lady Currey's meaning was unmistakable. In some way, she evidently held Claudia responsible.

Claudia played with her toast, but she made no reply. Gilbert was better, and his memory had returned to him, but he was again very irritable and rebellious. After the two excitements had come the reaction, and she sat facing the window, her face quite expressionless, weariness and boredom in her eyes and on her lips. Her excursion into the realm of romance was over. She did not regret her decision, but now life seemed stale and unprofitable, like the drab sea-shore when the turbulent waters have receded. It seemed to her at the moment that she had come to an end of all things. Life stretched in a grey monotone before her. She was in a cage, and what release could she hope for? Gilbert would go to Le Touquet and get better, and things would continue on just the same lines as before, only, unless her nature radically changed, she could never experiment again with the

modern solace of the dissatisfied married woman. A Rhoda Carnegie, a Circe might, but apparently for her it was impossible. As Jack had said, she would always see through the whole business.

She came out of her reverie to discover Lady Currey looking at her questioningly with her shallow eyes.

"I beg your pardon," she said contritely.

"I asked you if you really gave attention to his having good, nourishing food. I've always made a point of having the best English meat and fresh vegetables."

"I don't think it's a question of diet," replied Claudia, with a faint smile, "and we can't grow our vegetables on the balcony. Dr. Neeburg says it is overwork. Your husband once told me that hard work never yet hurt any man."

"Fancy his being locked up in a common police-cell! I shall never get over that. My poor dear Gilbert! What his feelings must have been when he recovered himself! It seems to me the police were greatly to blame in exceeding their duty, but my husband tells me we cannot take action against them.... Do you give Gilbert porridge for his breakfast? I strongly believe in porridge myself."

"You might talk to Dr. Neeburg," suggested her daughter-in-law. Her only comfort was the great bowl of narcissi in the centre of the table and Billie's warm, loving little body against her skirt. She was certain he looked up every now and then with sympathy in his soft eyes.

"I don't approve of a German doctor, even though he has been in England most of his life," said Lady Currey primly. "I know all about German doctors and their cleverness, but is it the right kind of cleverness? I wish Gilbert would see dear old Doctor Green. He treated him as a baby. All German doctors are faddists. I daresay Dr. Green could have averted this trouble. He's wonderful when I've got a sore throat, and his manner is so

restful. He doesn't approve of German doctors either. He says they experiment on you. That's exactly what I think.... Don't you think your laundry puts too much starch in the serviettes? Starch ruins good linen. I see there is a small hole already in the corner of this one. No, no German doctors for me, thank you. I should make ready to die if I fell in the hands of one."

Claudia knew that she ought to be able to laugh—inwardly—but somehow her sense of humour seemed to have deserted her. One cannot support life entirely on a sense of humour, though it helps one over many a dreary mile. How Pat would have enjoyed the conversation, thought Claudia.

"Does this German say how long Gilbert ought to rest? It's dreadful to think of his work being at a standstill."

"Some months, but it depends, of course, on the patient. He seems to have got another touch of influenza—I suppose it was the cold of the cells, and he never really got rid of it; but next Monday he will go to Le Touquet."

"I suppose Le Touquet is all right," said Lady Currey, in a dissatisfied tone. "I think French places are often so enervating, and you can never be sure of the water in France. I must tell Gilbert always to drink mineral water. France is so dreadfully behind in the matter of hygiene. Look at a Frenchwoman's pasty complexion."

"Le Touquet is above any kind of reproach," Claudia reassured her, hailing the arrival of coffee as one who, lost in the bush, sees the first sign of a human habitation. "The air is excellent, and Gilbert always enjoys the golf there. He chose it himself out of several places. He hates sea-voyages, you know, or Dr. Neeburg wished him to go on one."

"Yes, I know. He inherits my constitution in that respect. Are these cups old Worcester? I have some

very like them, but I do not care to have them used. You know they are very valuable? Servants are so careless. They broke a really exquisite piece of old Chelsea the other day. I cried, I positively cried, and had a headache all the rest of the day. I don't know when I have been so upset, except"—hastily—"of course, when I heard the terrible news about poor Gilbert! I think I'll go up and see how he feels now, and ask him if he won't see Dr. Green."

Later in the day Mr. Littleton came in to see Claudia. He found her with Billie on her lap, a volume of Strindberg's plays in her hands. He took in at a glance her tired, languid aspect, though she greeted him cordially enough. There were but few people she wanted to see that day, but Littleton was one of them.

"Madame," he said with mock seriousness, "Strindberg is not good reading for you to-day. Horribly clever, but much too morbid. His plays are interesting to those who study human nature, but they are not exhilarating."

"Morbid! I don't know. Because he presents men and women as complex, many-sided, vari-coloured egos, you call him morbid. Don't talk like Jack."

He smiled and picked up the book, and commenced to read. "'Our souls, so eager for knowledge, cannot rest satisfied with seeing what happens, but must also learn how it comes to happen. What we want to see are just the wires, the machinery. We want to investigate the box with the false bottom, touch the magic ring in order to find the suture, and look into the cards to discover how they are marked.' You can carry that spirit too far, you know. I guess you have too much time on your hands. How is your husband?"

"Better. He goes to Le Touquet next week."

"Le Touquet! Why, I'm going there for a few days; partly because a French author I want to see is there, and won't leave his golf to write letters, and partly be-

cause I want a little holiday. How delightful! We shall meet there, then."

"Oh! I am not going."

He was distinctly disappointed. "Is it permitted to ask why not? It's delicious weather now. Can't you smell the sea and the pines and the springy, sandy grass?"

She could, and a sudden desire to get away from London caught hold of her. She would have to meet Frank if she kept her engagements, and that would be awkward. She was willing to be friends, to turn over the page, but she divined that he was too angry. It would be awkward.

He saw the sudden light in her eyes, the quickening of interest, and urged her afresh.

"We could make it international golf, you know, England *versus* America. And between the holes we could talk Strindberg if you liked. Not that you would want to, with a fresh breeze blowing in your face, and your club in your hand." They both laughed. "No, I can't see Strindberg on a golf-course. Do come. Was your husband going alone? Surely that is not good for him?"

"Colin Paton is going with him."

"Oh!" Littleton did some quick thinking. He had wondered once or twice if she were particularly interested in Colin, but as she had not thought of accompanying them, he deduced that the answer was in the negative. "Then we should be a foursome on our own: Have you anything very special to keep you in London?"

"No, except poor Fay, you know. She has got to look forward to my going to her constantly."

"But," said Charles Littleton gently, "she is likely to be ill for many, many months, is she not? Forgive me for attempting to persuade you to anything, but you know you are not looking quite your usual self. You are not the woman I met at the Rivingtons. I don't know if it is fresh air you need, but fresh air always helps every

trouble, don't you think? One can always see everything more clearly in the country. You are much too analytical and introspective. Blow the mental cobwebs away at Le Touquet."

He felt practically sure she would come when he left, and expectation leapt high at the thought of the days with her. Her husband would be there, but he realized that he had no rival in her husband. He did not dread burnt-out fires, and Colin Paton would naturally pair with Gilbert. He was not an imaginative man, he had never had any time to dream, and he had always stifled any tender shoots of romance; but he longed to have her there with him, among the sweet-scented pines through which they would walk, on the fine stretches of grass and sand, playing the little white ball, by the sea-shore with its curling waves and long, long stretches of level, golden sand. Romance had come to him late in life, but now he did not stifle it. He would stake his all on this throw; he would make a fight for what he did not deserve to win. Perhaps Fate would be kind to him, perhaps she would forgive his early absorption in business, his blunt refusals of her invitations to enjoy life. He had rejected the possibilities of love before, now—now was there still a chance for him? If Claudia could be won—ah! the tall, spare American who walked along with alert, springy footsteps was not thinking of dollars or glory, only of the beauty of a woman's heart and body which had swept him off his feet. His whole soul was invaded by her presence. She was his entire horizon.

So it happened that on Monday they all travelled together. Colin had approved heartily of her going, and as soon as she set foot on the Boulogne boat Claudia felt a little uplift that brightened her face and made it possible for her once again to take an interest in her fellow-creatures. Colin and Littleton were both good companions, and though Gilbert was rather morose—his humiliating

experience had left a scar that would not heal—Claudia was happier than she had been for a long time.

She knew that she was happier, and she wondered why. Nothing was changed. Then she resolutely put questioning on one side. "I won't think about myself or my stupid emotions," she said vehemently to herself. "I'll just be a brainless animal for awhile, at least"—truthfully—"I'll try."

She was saying this to herself when she noticed that Colin was regarding her.

"Were your lips moving in silent prayer?" he said jokingly, "or was it some great poem in glory of the sea?"

"Neither. I was taking myself to task. I was telling myself not to be an idiot, or rather"—laughingly—"to be one."

"It's rather involved. Is there any key?"

"Yes, I'm the key. If you know me well——" She stopped and coloured, for she remembered when he had said he knew her better than she knew herself. She turned her head away as she added hastily, "But anyway, it's not worth solving. Who was it that said you should never try to understand women, you should be content with loving them?"

"Someone who wanted to appear smart," answered Colin promptly.

"Do you think you understand women?"

"Heaven forfend! Is thy servant a grey-headed wizard that he should lay claim to such knowledge? Wouldst thou have me bear a burden beyond my years? Besides, if I pretended that I did, you'd only slay me with great despatch and neatness. Do look at that elderly woman occupying four seats!"

"Well, look at the man who has just put his seat in the middle of the gangway and looks daggers at everyone who falls over his chair!.... By the by, you know Patricia has announced her determination of coming over to Le Touquet for a few days next week." She spoke care-

lessly, but she watched the effect of her words upon him. She could see no change, however. He only nodded cheerily.

"We shall be quite a merry party, shan't we? She has announced her intention of turning ten complete somersaults on the first green!"

"She's a dear, isn't she?"

"Of the first water." But there was no undue enthusiasm in his tone. "And she's very devoted to you."

"Is she? I don't deserve it."

"Not in the least. I have been trying to talk her out of it. Quite unsuccessfully, I may add."

It was really very provoking. He would not be drawn. Did he deliberately refuse her his confidence? Were he and Pat keeping a secret?

She tried again.

"I suppose she'll be getting married one of these days."

"Well, he said thoughtfully, "it is a fate that frequently overtakes charming women. The lady with the four seats has been obliged to relinquish one of her seats to another elderly female with a bird-cage. It takes an elderly lady to outwit another elderly lady."

"Pat don't believe in marriage."

"We none of us *believe* in marriage. It's a question of faith and hope, like religion. It isn't an Athanasian Creed, with vehement damnatory clauses, which have no application to yourself."

"You can't talk, you haven't tried it," retorted Claudia. "Then you think—someone—will convert Pat to the usual fate? You already see her in white satin and orange-blossom, and a noisy voice from Eden breathing hard over her?" The wind was causing her hair to wave wildly, and whipping her cheeks to a brilliant pink. Some of the sparkle had come back in her eyes at the contest, and the man at her side was more than aware of her good looks. "Two of us have already made disastrous mar-

riages. Heigh ho! for a third! I'm sure there's no luck of the children of Circe!"

She had never said plainly before to him that her marriage was a failure. Always they had played about the borderland of truth, each knowing that the other knew. To-day for some reason, she had spoken plainly.

He was silent, leaning against the gunwale, looking down at the hurrying, foaming waters below.

"Are you shocked at me for my lack of reticence?" she said rather bitterly. "Yes, you can't joke about that. I wanted to make you serious. Oh, yes! you *can* make a joke now. Look, your old lady is not feeling well, and is hurriedly relinquishing the three seats. Why don't you look? It's quite funny, and you always take life with a smile."

But he never lifted his eyes from the foaming, greenish water. Only his hand, which gripped the gunwale tightly, showed any sign of emotion.

"Don't. . . . Perhaps when Gilbert is better——"

"Oh, no! it's quite hopeless. You can't make a new fire with white ashes. Did you ever think we were suited to one another?" She was gazing out at sea. Every now and then a lurch of the boat sent her arm against his, and once a strand of her hair swept his cheek.

He was a little time before he replied. "Claudia, you once said something like that before. You said I might have warned you. Was that fair? It hurt me. Suppose I had said to you, 'I don't think Gilbert can make you happy.' What would you have thought of me? Think how happy and confident you were. And—can anyone interfere in such matters? Are they not questions we *must* decide for ourselves? I—or anyone—would always be utterly helpless, whatever you chose to do."

She gave a sigh. "I know. I shouldn't have believed you."

The next words seemed to slip out almost against his

will. "And you might have thought I was jealous of my friend."

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed impulsively. "I should never have thought that."

"I see," he replied, with a bitterness she had never before heard in his voice. "I was never a real man to you. I was and am only a literary abstraction, an amiable stuffed animal, suitable for friendship, a——"

She lifted startled, amazed eyes to his, but at that instant Littleton's voice sounded the other side of her.

"I need not ask you if you enjoy the sea, Mrs. Currey? Isn't it bully? I like it rough, don't you?"

Just then the spray caught them all, and for the next few minutes they were busy laughingly mopping their faces and coats.

"I call that a playful smack in the eye for my patronizing tone," said Littleton. "I believe Nature hates us most when we patronize her. She did us all in then. Say, Mrs. Currey, will your husband be able to do much golfing?"

She looked inquiringly at Colin, for Neeburg had given him the final instructions.

"In moderation, Mr. Littleton. He mustn't get over-tired—Neeburg was very insistent on that—but a certain amount of golf and exercise will keep him from brooding, and make him healthily tired."

Littleton nodded. "I once had a bad attack of nerves. My! but I shall never forget it. I got so that I stuttered in my speech, and I used to fancy people were watching me. I couldn't sleep and had all sorts of weird fancies. I could hear the telephone-bell ringing all night, and when I did get to sleep, I used to jump up with a shout to answer it. They sent me for a long sea-voyage to Australia. I came back cured. But it was an awful time. One ought to be sympathetic with a man in that condition. Only one who has been through really understands."

After a few minutes Claudia left the two men and walked over to where Gilbert was seated in a chair, reading the *Times*. He did not suffer from *mal de mer*, but he always experienced a curious feeling in his head, as though someone had put a band round his forehead.

"Gilbert, why don't you enjoy the air and the sea?" she said gently. "Why do you worry your brain with the paper?" She noticed he was reading the law news.

He did not look up at her, but finished reading a case before he replied. "I knew the view Morely would take of the affair. I told Roche so at the beginning. He's the most bigoted old fool on the bench. What did you say? Well, the sea bores me. It's just—sea!"

"Talk to me. The trip is very short."

With evident reluctance he put down the paper.

"Gilbert," she said earnestly, "do give yourself every chance. Can't you pretend to yourself that this a well-earned holiday, and that you are going to enjoy it thoroughly? Put London and the Law Courts out of your mind."

He gave a half-sigh, half-grunt. "That's like a woman. Women think you can detach yourself from your real interest in life, like you can take off an old overcoat. I must think of something. Claudia, how many papers did my—my accident get into?"

"Only one or two unimportant ones. You needn't worry about that, Gilbert."

He frowned at the blue sky overhead. "I suppose everybody was laughing about it.... It was that hot whisky that did it."

"Yes. Don't think about it."

"A few weeks will set me up. I suppose I really did need a holiday. But I never thought I should have to give up like this. You've got the laugh on me, Claudia."

"I don't want to laugh, Gilbert. I realize what this means to you and—I'm sorry."

He looked at her with his sombre, heavy-lidded eyes, that had once darkened with overmastering passion, that night of the dance. All the youthfulness had gone out of the face. He might have been a man of forty-five instead of thirty-five. Youth had fought unsuccessfully with a heaviness of the spirit that had always been there, but had greatly increased the last two years. She wondered of what he was thinking as he looked at her. One could never guess with Gilbert. He had the typical barrister's face, non-committal, secretive of his thoughts.

Then he said abruptly, "Enjoy yourself at Le Touquet. I shan't. It's medicine, and I must take it. Just leave me alone and have a good time yourself. Is that Boulogne? Thank goodness!"

CHAPTER XX

BACK TO "THE GAME"

GILBERT did not prove an easy patient to manage, because though he was still in need of treatment, being well had become a habit. He was impatient of any restraint, and sometimes almost rude to Colin, who took the chief share of the restraining. Neeburg had limited him to nine holes, morning and afternoon, which meant that a good portion of his day was unoccupied.

And that which Claudia had foreseen came to pass. He had no hobby to amuse him. He hated to be alone with his own thoughts, and yet he was either impatient with other people's conversation and ideas, or he was bored with the subjects that interested them, and did not interest him. He did not sleep well, and he had taken a dislike to books. Bridge and billiards he had always considered a waste of time, and the entertainments at the small Casino did not amuse him. He took no interest in the small happenings of life, which for other people pleasantly diversify the days with their light and shade. His day was one long fidget to get back into harness.

Still, the bracing air did him good, and his nerves daily got steadier. Sometimes he almost looked his old self.

One day, after they had been there for a week, it happened to be very wet, and golf for Gilbert was out of the question. He and Colin were sitting out on the

verandah of the Golf Hotel, smoking and talking, when Claudia came out to them. She seated herself a little distance away, with *Le Petit Journal*, which she looked at in a desultory holiday sort of way, as they went on talking. Gilbert was evidently replying to some remark of Colin's.

"It's what you call 'tolerance' that is ruining England. It's a blessing for her that there are a few 'intolerant' people left. You know, Colin, you've got mixed up with a lot of cranks, all grinding their own little axes. For instance, I can't think why you want to mess about with such questions as Child Labour. It won't make you popular, very few people take an interest in it. Why don't you leave such questions to faddists? I wonder that a man of your ability plays about with such small issues."

Claudia saw a fighting gleam in Colin's eye, but he replied quietly enough.

"We always did disagree on our definition of 'small,' you know, Gilbert. A small question does not become a big one because it becomes the popular one of the day."

Gilbert made a gesture of impatience. "Nonsense, you must accept the world's verdict on these things, and let me tell you, as a lawyer, that the verdict of the people is pretty sound, in spite of any Ibsen paradoxes you may fling at me. If you like to paddle about in a backwater, no one can prevent you, but don't pretend it's the main stream, or rather don't expect anyone to believe you. I think enough has been talked about Child Labour. Sentimental twaddle! The law has done all that is necessary."

"Have you ever gone closely into the question, Gilbert?" Colin took his cigarette-case out of his pocket and abstracted another cigarette.

"Yes, as much as I want to. I once had a compensation case, where a lot of sentiment was dragged in by the heels."

"Ah! you represented the employer, of course?" He threw the match over the verandah.

"Well? The parents of the child were willing it should work. The sentiment came in when it got injured."

"Exactly, that's just what we complain of. Child labour demoralizes the parents. But, leaving the parents out of the question," his voice grew warmer, in spite of his evident effort to keep cool—"don't you see that the interest of future generations of workers demands that children, instead of becoming 'half-timers,' shall have a chance to develop, to let their bodies grow into something strong and fine, so that—and this should appeal to *you*—England may hold her own against other younger, more vigorous nations. I say nothing about the joyless lives of the children who are old in mind as well as body before those of our class go to Eton or Harrow, but surely the future of the race interests you? You get more work out of a vigorous, able-bodied man or woman."

"Oh yes! I'm interested, but I prefer to work for the present generation. I'll do without a rain-washed, dirty statue that a crank occasionally puts a wreath on and no one else remembers."

"Gilbert!" exclaimed Claudia, unable to let the taunt pass. "How can you be such an arrant materialist?"

"We live in a materialistic age, my dear," said her husband coolly. "In a few years' time ideals will be as dead as door-nails. Idealists are usually weak dreamers, who resent the driving force of others, and who try—in effectually—to dam the current of their progress. I don't mean that you are to be classed with these ineffectuals, Colin, but you allow yourself to be carried away by their enthusiasms. Enthusiasm is a good servant, but a bad master. To do anything worth doing, you must have a judicial mind, and put nothing of yourself in the scale."

"All the great reformers of the world have been enthusiasts," cried Claudia impetuously. "The dry-as-dust,

cold-blooded men and women have never achieved anything. I say, thank God for the enthusiasts of the world, who are not dismayed by columns of statistics!"

Her eyes and Colin's met, and his thanked her silently, but a little shake of the head told her not to trouble to argue, that it was only beating her head against a brick wall.

"My dear Claudia, you are a woman and belong to the emotional, impressionable sex. But, for Heaven's sake, don't you join any of these crank movements," he went on impatiently—"for if I am going into Parliament, I don't want to be saddled with my wife's partisanships. It's quite enough to fight the cranks in the House, I don't want any on my own hearthrug."

She was tempted to make a hot retort, but Colin's look checked her. After all, it *was* useless, and she had determined not to quarrel with him.

"I shan't be able to stick this much longer," grumbled her husband, getting up and inspecting the leaden skies. "Rotten weather!"

"It's the first bad day we've had, old man," replied his friend cheerfully.

"And no newspapers yet.... I wasn't cut out for a life of idleness. I'll got in and write some letters."

He got up and left them on the verandah, and Claudia gave up the pretense of reading.

"Colin," she exclaimed vehemently, "how came you and he to be friends when you are so different? His views are too awful."

"There are a lot of people who think as he does," returned Colin thoughtfully. "But it was sweet of you to take up the cudgels on my behalf. Those things are not easy to do in front of—a Gilbert."

She flushed a little. "I just had to say it. I was so entirely with you. I always am. And yet, he is my husband."

"*You* don't think me weak and ineffectual?" He looked out over the rain-bleared golf-course, at the dark row of pines in the distance. "You used to lay so much stress on strength, on achievement. You quite frightened me."

"Don't!" she said quickly. "Sometimes one may mistake hardness for strength. Don't"—pitifully—"don't rub it in, Colin." Her eyes suddenly filled with tears.

"Oh, my dear!"—the caress seemed to slip out involuntarily—"I didn't mean to do that.... And though I wanted you to say I wasn't, I *am* weak—pitifully weak.... I want a woman's good opinion, a woman's approval. I want someone to believe in me, to urge me on.... that's weak, isn't it?"

"Only according to Gilbert's creed," she said softly, "You and I have a different one."

He got up and paced the verandah.

"It would be happier for you if you could adopt his creed—and you're very young. You want happiness?"

"Badly."

"I wish—I could see you happy. The Bible says, 'the prayer of the righteous man availeth much,' but I can't pray."

"I don't believe you are any happier—although you seem so cheerful—than I am."

"No."

The rain softly murmured around them. They were the only occupants of the verandah.

"We're not very lucky, are we?...." She turned abruptly to him, her hands gripping the edge of the verandah, her eyes bright with a curious wildness. "Colin, I'm sometimes so frightened of the future. I'm twenty-four now. Shall I always go on being unhappy and dissatisfied until I become a nasty, bitter, lonely old woman, jealous of every happy couple I meet, envious of everyone else's happiness? It's a horrid picture, isn't it?"

He did not say a word, but he watched her profile as she looked out at the rain.

"Gilbert will grow more and more like his father, and he will become the right honorable member for Langton. He may rise to be Attorney-General. Perhaps he'll get a seat in the Cabinet. I shall open Primrose League bazaars and be chilly to the wives of Labour members when I meet them. I shall go to innumerable long, stupid dinners and try and remember to be gracious to the right persons. I shall become the possessor of some wonderful china and perhaps flit about with a duster in a silk bag. And my heart—well—with a sudden gust of passion that left her face deathly white—"I hope it will be atrophied by that time."

They had neither of them noticed the approach of a motor, so that they were both startled to hear an English shout from the bottom of the steps.

"Hallo! Isn't the water cold?"

It was Pat, neat and workmanlike in her blue serge, a small hat rammed down over her yellow hair. She grinned up at their surprise.

"Pat! We didn't expect you until to-morrow."

"I know, but I suddenly got fed up with London. I hope I haven't put the town band out by coming so soon, but I just had to come."

She came striding up the steps and gave Claudia a hug.

"Bless you, my children. Paton, I shall be in tremendous form to-morrow. I feel it coming on. Directly I got on the boat I wanted to drive off from the head of the gangway, only it would be sure to have been a lost ball.... I lost five last week. I think they were winged angels masquerading as golf-balls. How's Gilbert? Billie sends his forlorn love. He's as mournful as a Chinese idol. Do you know where I'm supposed to hang myself up?"

Claudia, who had arranged for her room on the mor-

row, went ahead into the hotel, Colin and Pat following after. She could not help hearing a hasty whisper of, "Paton, I've got lots of things to tell you. Just *had* to see you. Everything is going to be all right, and I'm so happy."

So her suspicions were correct. Colin and Pat were in love with one another. Pat "just had to see him." What was that but love? Only love can drive with such impatience.

"I hope it's a pretty long bed," she could hear Pat chattering. "I went to stay at an hotel once, and we took it in turns to rest, my top half and my lower half. I'd like to sleep all at once, if possible."

Colin laughed. He was always on very cheery terms with Patricia, and she with him. It was she, Claudia remembered, who had once so highly extolled Paton as a possible husband. At that time she had not appeared to have any *penchant* for him. But sometimes the knowledge of her love comes suddenly to a young girl. Perhaps it had come suddenly to Pat. And she would make him a very nice wife. She was loyal to the core, and she would believe in him. She would fight for him, if necessary, through thick and thin, the bigger the fight the more she would like it. She would never quite understand one side of him, perhaps, but maybe her steady cheeriness was what he needed. How often she had heard it said that like should not seek like in marriage. She remembered someone had said, "In love they who resemble, separate." Pat was lucky, and if she felt a little twinge of jealousy—well, it was the first symptoms of the soured old woman period she had been envisaging. She would presently look on all young couples in the same way.

"So your sister has arrived," she heard Mr. Littleton say, as she stood musing in the hall. "She hasn't brought good weather with her."

"No," returned Claudia mechanically, "but Pat doesn't mind the weather."

"Well, I guess that befits an Amazon. She's a splendid specimen of English womanhood."

Her sister nodded. Yes, she was; no wonder Colin admired her.

"A little too splendid for my taste," smiled Littleton. "Who was it laid down the law that a woman should be just as high as the shoulder of the man she loves?" He looked at the dark, glossy head just on the level of his own shoulder, but she did not notice it. She was trying to adjust her ideas: "I reckon he was a cosy man, who ever he was."

He wondered what had caused that curiously blank look on her face, a sort of half stunned surprise.

Just then Pat and Colin came laughing into the hall, she having, with her characteristic quickness, found and donned a tweed rain-proof coat.

"Claud, we're going for a tramp. Come with us? It's no good minding the wet. You look as if you've been in all day."

Her sister pulled herself together and replied lightly, "I'm sure, from your tone, it's an unbecoming look, but I refuse to let the rain wash it off. I hate walking in the rain."

"It's nearly left off," said Paton, glancing out of the door, "the clouds are breaking."

"I tell you I don't want to go.... Run away, young people!"

Littleton noticed the edge to her tone, noticed it because he loved her and, by now, had grown sensitive to its many inflections. Because he loved her, he tried to understand her, to respond to her moods, to fall in with her humours. He adored her quick changes, sometimes half a dozen in the space of ten minutes; the melodies in her voice, sometimes tender, sometimes firm, occasion-

ally gay and still girlish. He was willing to do anything to make her happy, and he had seen very clearly the rift in the lute, the rift that had been inevitable. Could he hope to win her love? She had given him nothing that could be considered encouragement, although she was always friendly and ready to talk to him. She no longer loved her husband, and it was not possible that such a woman could exist for long without some man in her life. Why not——

Then he saw the expression on her face. She had forgotten he was standing there. She was absorbed in her thoughts, but her eyes were fixed on the couple going down the path. Pat was talking eagerly, and she had just slipped her hand confidentially within Colin's arm to emphasize some point.

Love gives even the most stupid of men extraordinary powers of intuition where the woman he loves is concerned. In a flash he knew that his own suit was hopeless and the reason.

His fair skin had grown very grey as he spoke to her, and the light in his eyes was suddenly quenched.

"Mrs. Currey, this is my last day here, you know. Too bad it's wet, isn't it? We might have gone over the links once again together."

The words effectually roused her. "Your last day here? I thought you were going to stay on a few more days? Oh, I'm sorry! But we shall meet when I come back to town, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"I'm afraid not," he said regretfully. "I—I shall probably be sailing for New York next week. The firm has been calling for me for some time. 'Home, sweet Home,' you know, and the American eagle!"

"Why, that's too bad." Her tone was unaffectedly regretful and sincere. Perhaps, later on, he would feel it a slight consolation that he had won through to her friendship, but at present it was caustic on the wound.

"I shall miss you. I suppose it's 'the game' once more? We women are hopelessly out of it!"

He shook his head. "There is only 'the game' left to me, and now—it doesn't interest me very much. Life has a queer way of giving you backhanders occasionally, hasn't it? Mrs. Currey, you've taught me there are finer things, more worth striving for, than mere commercial gain. Oh, it will fill up the time quite nicely, and I shall still get some thrills out of doing the other fellow." They had wandered out on the verandah again. "See here, I don't know how a woman takes these things. I don't know whether she likes a man to tell her he loves her, or would rather he went away with his tongue held between his teeth. But I feel I should like to tell you that I love you.... I would have done anything to win and keep your love, if there had been any hope for me. At one time I had a crazy dream you might, perhaps, trust yourself to me and make another start with me on the other side. I know you're brave enough to make a fight for your happiness, and not begrudge paying a price for it. You're not the kind of woman to be frightened by a few law-court bogys.... No, you need not look so sorry. It's my own fault. I walked clean into it. I guess I gave the best years of my life to the rottenest game out. Well, that game's all that is left me. I've got to go on playing, whether I want to or not."

"But I *am* sorry.... I like you so much. I almost wish—— But I think something has happened to my heart.... I can't feel it. I feel sort of numbed. I don't even seem to believe in love any longer. I wish I could fall in love. I think it would put some life in me. I used to laugh at a woman who said when she wasn't in love she was only half alive. But there's something in it. Degrading admission, isn't it?"

He looked at her with a curious expression—half wonderment, half tenderness.

"Then you don't know!" he exclaimed.

"Know what?" The figures of Colin and Pat were rapidly becoming miniatures in the distance.

"Never mind. Only when you *do* know—remember how we stood here—and that I knew."

CHAPTER XXI

THE MEANING OF LIFE

THE boy treaded his way among the tables, until he came to where the Currey party sat.

"Madame, s'il vous plaît, on vous demande au téléphone de l'Angleterre."

"Moi?" ejaculated Claudia, in surprise.

"Mais oui, Madame."

Claudia rose and hurried to the telephone, hardly having time to wonder who it could be. Then she heard Jack's voice on the other end.

"Claudia, is that you? Oh, for God's sake, old girl, come back. I have blurted out the truth to Fay. She cornered me, and I confessed to her there wasn't any chance.... It's dreadful....she wants you....we can't do anything with her. If you don't come, I shall blow my brains out. I can't stand it. Pat's there, isn't she? You can come, can't you?"

Claudia thought rapidly. "Yes, I'll come, Jack. By to-night's boat. All right, you meet me at Charing Cross."

She heard a sort of sob of relief from the other end, and he commenced to blab broken words of gratitude, but she cut him short. "No good talking on the telephone, old boy. It was rather cruel of you....you shouldn't have let her corner you. Tell her I'm coming."

She went back to the luncheon-table, but her appetite for lunch was gone.

She was half afraid Gilbert would make some objection to her going, but except by a shrug of his shoulders and the raising of his thick eyebrows, he put no obstacles in her way.

"Oh! poor little kid!" ejaculated Pat, her high spirits momentarily sobered. "Fancy knowing that there is no hope. Ugh! it must be like those torture-chambers of old, when the victims watched the walls gradually close in on them. I hope I shall die quickly and suddenly when my time comes."

"And yet there must be thousands at this very minute, as we sit here, who are knowingly being enclosed by those walls. I suppose we humans, on the whole, are a poor lot, and yet sometimes I am struck with amazement at the courage of men and women," said Colin thoughtfully. "When I pass through the crowded suburbs, I marvel at the amount of quiet, unnoticed heroism those brick walls must contain. But Fay—You have a difficult task before you, Claudia. You can't travel alone. I will take you back to London."

Claudia was longing to accept the offer, but she shook her head. "Oh, no! thank you, Colin. You needn't coddle me. Pat came over alone."

"Yes; but she came in the day-time, and you are travelling at night. Can't be done, madam. Pat will look after our patient."

"I wish you wouldn't fuss over me," said Gilbert testily. "Of course I am glad of your company, but I don't need any kind of looking after. I'm not a hysterical, nervy

woman. A man who is taking a rest isn't a patient of anyone's."

"Gilbert, don't be grumpy," said Pat, who was never in the least overawed by Gilbert. "All men want looking after. If you are rude, I shall follow you round the links with a tin of Brand's Essence and a spoon."

Colin's presence on the journey was a great comfort, for he was quietly thoughtful without being fussy, and she did not feel under any necessity to talk to him, unless she had something to say. But she was pleasantly conscious of his sympathy with her miserable errand. He took her to the door of the flat and left her.

Claudia was startled when she saw her brother. She had never believed it possible that anyone could go to pieces so badly in such a short time. His young, unlined face was haggard, his eyes were sunken and dull.

"Claudia, if you hadn't come, I should have put an end to myself. I can't stand seeing her suffer so. I wish I hadn't told her, but she's too cute for me. She always was."

"How did you come to blurt it out?"

"Why, we were sitting quietly together, and I was teaching her double-dummy, when she said, 'Jack, isn't it too bad, I shall never get better?'—quite quietly—just like I say it, and of course I—well, I gave the show away. She'd been suspicious for a long time, it seems. She remembers the case of a man in her profession that got hurt in the same way years ago. She knows how miserably he died a year afterwards.... She'd never said anything about it before. Must have been thinking it out. She raved it all out at me." He shivered. "I shall never get over this, Claudia."

She was silent, as she took off her gloves.

"She cries and cries, and then suddenly she screams in abject fright.... I keep on hearing those screams. I can't sleep for them. Oh, God! it's too awful."

The nurse had quietly entered. "I'm so glad you have

come, Mrs. Currey. You always had such an influence over her. Will you come in? She's been listening for your arrival."

It was something resembling a very young child that threw itself with cries and sobs into her arms, when she went to the bedside. Claudia knelt down and held her tightly and silently to her breast. What words could she use to the poor, frightened soul, that did not sound puerile and meaningless? Even if she had herself believed in the orthodox Heaven, Fay was too fond of this world to have found any comfort in the visionary prospect. If only the curtain had killed her outright on that fatal night! That moment of surprise would have been her only pang, and now——

"I don't want to die," sobbed Fay. "I'm young. I'm only twenty-two. It's wicked, it's wicked.... I won't be resigned. Nurse says I ought to be. But she isn't going to die."

"Fay, dear, I know it's terribly hard.... I shan't ask you to be resigned. But will you listen to me for a few minutes?"

"Yes, I will—if you don't want me to be resigned. Young people can't be resigned, can they?"

"No, but they can fight. Fay, have I ever told you how much I admire you for the way you've risen in your profession?" The sobbing grew quieter. "I've never had to do anything for my living, and I don't suppose I can imagine one tenth part of the difficulty with which people do earn their living—the competition, the horrid spectres which people of my class never see, the fear of breaking down, of not having enough at the end of the week to pay the rent, to find food and clothing. You were earning a splendid salary when—the accident happened, but you didn't always, did you?"

"Not much. The first few years after mother died I had precious little, an engagement here and there, and a

good many times I didn't know where the tin was coming from to pay the landlady."

"I know. I guessed all that, because very few people 'arrive' without making a big fight. I'm sure you made a splendid fight. You hung on to the managers and agents till they gave you engagements, and you set your teeth together and said to yourself, 'I won't be done,' didn't you?"

"Yes, but how did you know?" She lifted the distorted, tear-stained face wonderingly.

"You were quite a child when you made that fight, at an age when I was still in the schoolroom. And you fought fairly, and made lots of friends. Look at the crowds of letters you get, asking how you are. Fay, go on fighting. Don't give in now."

There was complete silence. The dark head was motionless. Claudia knew she was taking in the idea, for whenever Fay wanted to reason with herself, she always thought in silence. She always took a special interval from life to do her thinking.

"But what am I to fight for?" she said at length.

"To keep your own respect and the respect and admiration of all who know you. Poor Jack loves you very much in his way, and he is distracted. Help to steady him, Fay. He is beginning to look at life more seriously. He admires you immensely as an artist, make him admire you as a *woman*. You told me once that you didn't want to do him any harm by marrying him. You can do him a great deal of good."

"Poor old Jumbo! I scared him out of his life." She gave a ghost of her gay smile. "I knew I'd get it out of him. No one else would tell me."

"He's known all the time," went on Claudia, stroking her hair, as she would have a child's. "It's been a terrible burden, Fay. You can see from his face how he has been brooding over it. Jack's never had to bear any

kind of trouble in his life before. The world has been all rose-leaves for him. I think he's been putting up a bit of a fight, too, because he hates trouble and illness, and all the uncomfortable things of life. He's come pretty regularly to see you, hasn't he?"

"Yes, he has. I see what you're driving at. But why should I have to die? I swear to God I never did no one no harm that I know of. There was a chap once I was awful fond of, and him of me. We used to keep on meeting on the Stoll tour. One week his wife came along. She was a silly, soppy piece of goods; he liked a bit of a devil, like me, but she was dead stuck on him, and there was a baby coming. I sent him back to her, straight, I did. I wouldn't have no truck with him. He sent me an awful nice letter when I got hurt. He'll be sorry when—when he hears."

"I'm sure he will."

Fay was silent again, her blue eyes fixed on an absurd Teddy Bear on the chest of drawers. Then she said with a queer jumble of ideas that left Claudia speechless:

"I shan't be able to do that American tour next year, and I shall never have a baby. Some people think kids are a nuisance, but I'd like to have had one. Babies are awful cute, aren't they? Mabel Floyd's got a kid of four years old, and she does all her mother's songs. Makes you die with laughing. You should see her do the Bond Street strut, with her mother's monocle. She'll make a hit on the halls one of these days. Got it in her, you know, same as I had." She looked at a framed photograph which hung on one of the walls. "Mother died when she was thirty-two, but that was because she got soaking wet one night, going to the theatre. But she didn't mind dying much. I remember that. She was dead tired, you know. My father took his hook when I was four years old, and he had knocked all the life out of her. I can remember her saying, 'If it wasn't for you, I'd be glad to

take a rest, Fay.' But I don't feel like that. I never allowed any man to make my life a misery. If there was any misery going about, the men got it. I wasn't taking any. Take my tip, my dear, don't you let 'em squeeze everything out of you. Mother taught me that lesson. She had a thin time, poor thing." Suddenly she commenced to cry again, but gently. "I've heard people say that those that are dead can look down on us. Do you think mother can see me now?"

"Perhaps, Fay. We know very little about the spiritual world."

After a minute Fay took her head off Claudia's shoulder, and pushed her away a little with one of her small, babyish hands. Her blue eyes, still wet, searched her face with such acuteness that Claudia was glad she had nothing to hide any longer.

"Claudia, did you think all this out—about the fighting—as you came to see me? Did you make it all up?"

Claudia shook her head, and her eyes were dark with her own thoughts as she replied:

"No, Fay. It wasn't thought out at all. I'll tell you the truth. I hadn't the least idea what I could say to you. I kept on asking myself, 'What shall I say? What shall I say?' Then suddenly, as I came into your room and saw you crying among the pillows, I knew what life must mean for you, for me, for Jack, for everybody. A sudden light seemed to come to me. An answer came to some questions I have lately been putting to myself. I realized that it doesn't matter whether you win or lose, whether you are happy or unhappy, as long as you keep on fighting. I don't understand life any more than you do, dear. Sometimes it seems a pretty dreary business. I'm hopelessly at sea. But—I see now—one must go on swimming. You mustn't just let your arms fall to your side and sink. Perhaps, if you keep on swimming, a boat may pick you up, or you may find an unsuspected island,

and even if you don't get rescued, I think one must die—swimming.”

Fay's eyes opened widely, and her arms stole again round her sister-in-law's neck.

“How sad your voice sounds,” she whispered. “Are you having a bad time? Aren't you happy, either?”

Her sister-in-law's voice was a little unsteady as she said, in a low voice, “Fay, shall I tell you a secret? Can you keep one?”

“Honour bright. May I be——”

“Listen, then.... No, I'm not happy.... I haven't found anything that I wanted in life. It's all makeshifts. I'm very restless, very dissatisfied, and just at the moment I don't find life worth living. Only yesterday I was talking like a beastly coward. I was telling a friend that I was frightened of the future, that I could see only blank, empty, joyless days, and that I was going to develop into a nasty, soured, cold-hearted woman. Now I see how disgusting it was of me to say things like that, especially when I was making him unhappy too. I know I ought to brace up my muscles, and start swimming—like you. I don't feel like it, any more than you do.... You'll keep my secret, won't you, Fay, and when I get tired, I'll come to you and do a howl, and when you get tired you shall do the howling. And then we'll make another effort and go on swimming again. We'll help one another, won't we? Somehow, I fancy the strong people of this world are not those who always achieve great things, but those who keep on fighting, who will not be downed by circumstances.”

Fay kissed her passionately. “I love you. I'd do anything for you. And if I can help you—I didn't know you had any troubles—I should be so proud of myself. I've always looked upon you as someone who didn't want any help, who always found it easy to do”—vaguely—“the right thing.”

"No! No!" cried Claudia, thinking of the humiliating scene in the studio, "I don't find it easy at all. I find everything horribly difficult and confusing.... I haven't even got any fixed principles now. I hardly know what I believe or disbelieve. Sometimes I think I am only an artist, a pagan, merely craving for the beautiful, the perfect; sometimes I feel there is more in life and love than that....there must be, there must be....the whole fabric of life could not have been built upon such an insecure foundation. Passion is a big factor in life, but there must be a bigger."

She was talking to herself now, talking out her own doubts, but Fay lay perfectly still, listening to the voice that she loved, and comprehending only that this woman she had always thought so favoured, so lucky, so above the storms that beset her own course, was in trouble, and that it eased her mind to talk to her—The Girlie Girl of the music-halls. She, Fay, had been entrusted with her secret, and her heart swelled with a pride that made her for a few minutes forget her own tragedy. "Dead common," she called herself, she was Claudia's confidante. If Claudia wanted her to keep on fighting—well, it must be done, somehow or other.

"Life can't be a joke of the gods," went on Claudia. "It's the fashion nowadays to pretend that it is—but it can't be. One can't simply give way to every temptation with the excuse that one is unhappy, that life has cheated you. If nobody wants you to be loyal to them, you must be loyal to yourself. Oh! how I wish I understood things better."

There was a click of the door-handle and the nurse came in.

"Mrs. Currey, the cook has got some soup and cold chicken for you in the dining-room. You must be tired after travelling. Won't you take a little?"

"Yes," said Fay, rubbing her fists in her eyes, "she

must. She's a duck to come so quickly. Nurse, I'm going to be good after this; at least, I'm going to make a try. It isn't much in my line, but I'm not so old I can't learn a new song and dance.... Claudia, send old Jumbo to me."

At that instant "old Jumbo" put his head dubiously round the door. He was the weakest of husbands and men, but helped by Colin's lecture, he had almost overcome his repugnance to a sick-room. The last two days had frightened him out of his very limited wits. He had not heard Fay sobbing for the last quarter of an hour. Had Claudia got her asleep or——

"Hallo, Jumbo," called out Fay. "Come over here and give me a kiss."

His stupid, handsome face brightened, and some of the scared look disappeared from the eyes.

"Cheer oh, Fay, old girl!" he said huskily. "I'm glad you're better."

Claudia and the nurse left the strange married couple together.

* * * * *

At that same moment Colin was tearing open a telegram which his man said had arrived a couple of hours previously. It was from Pat at Le Touquet, and Colin quickly mastered the disquieting contents.

"Come back quickly and bring Neeburg if possible. Gilbert has had a seizure. Would play eighteen holes. Tried to stop him. Don't alarm Claudia. No immediate danger."

CHAPTER XXII

A SICK MAN'S FANCY

FROM the day that Gilbert was brought back to England, some weeks later, Claudia's life became one of deadly rustic monotony. Neeburg had not been surprised at the seizure. Cardiac trouble not infrequently followed on neglected influenza, he said, and combined with his nervous breakdown was, though not actually dangerous to his life, serious enough to make, for a time, a complete invalid of him. He was kept lying in his bed until he was well enough to be moved from Le Touquet, and then, in answer to his mother's entreaties—she still seemed vaguely to hold Claudia responsible—he went down to his old home at Wynnstay.

It was out of the question for him to continue living in London for some time to come, and Neeburg approved of the air of Wynnstay, which was pure and bracing. It was situated on the Sussex Downs, and from the topmost windows a glittering streak, which was the sea in the distance, could be glimpsed.

Life had not been any too cheery during those last weeks at Le Touquet, but at Wynnstay Claudia felt as though she were in prison.

It was *his* home, and Claudia was made to feel that though the wife of the sick man, she was an outsider. Gilbert's moroseness had increased, and rank bitterness was in his heart. Sometimes Claudia fancied that he

looked at her with furious envy in his eyes as she came with her springy steps across the lawn to where he was stretched out under a big tree. He did not wish to see any of their friends—was it the same reason, envy of their health?—so that very few people came to the house. Sometimes Lady Currey made it plain that instead of tramping along the country lanes, which was her one solace—there were no golf-links near—Claudia ought to appear in the sedate, sunless drawing-room with its cabinets of valuable china, and make small talk for the wife of the vicar and the sister of the curate, and listen to genteel opinions on a variety of subjects—no one could say even the biggest were shirked—of which the exponents knew less than nothing.

Sometimes Claudia felt she was shriveling into a polite, well-bred mummy. Gilbert expected her to write all his letters for him—he still kept in touch with his office—so that he resented her wishing to go up to town even for the day. She knew it was unreasonable, but after a while she ceased to care very much.

Lady Currey had always disliked Patricia, whom privately she characterized as “a loud, indecently large hoyden,” and she made this so plain that Claudia could not urge Pat to come down to visit her. Indeed, with the Currey family she had no rights at all, either to personal friends or opinions. Any views which she was sometimes exasperated into expressing were generally received in chilly silence.

Sick people are notoriously capricious in their likes and dislikes, and Gilbert seemed to have taken a dislike to Colin. They had been together quite amiably at Le Touquet, but once at Wynnstay, Gilbert never suggested that he should come down, and once, when Colin motored down, received him in such an indifferent manner that no one could have misunderstood. Then, at the beginning of July Colin had gone up to Lancashire to pursue

some investigations on the Child Labour problem for Sir Michael Carton, and since then Claudia had only had letters from him. The letters were always charming, unobtrusively encouraging and subtly sympathetic, telling her something of his work and discussing the books in the Currey library, which helped to while away her time, but she missed him. She wondered why he and Pat did not announce their engagement, and therefore she was not in the least surprised when she got the following letter from Pat one morning in August:

"I *must* see you, old girl, so I'm coming down for the week-end, and, like the improper female your mother-in-law thinks me (Oh! what would she think of a really improper female? But there, I suppose really improper females can't afford to behave improperly, they have to prune and prism), I have taken rooms at the Three Compasses Inn in the village. They've got a ducky room—it looks out on the duck-pond and they will quack me a matutinal lay—which I investigated last time I came down to see you for the day. Socky shall chase the ducks, and I'll eat any he kills, or send them, with his compliments, to Lady Currey. But I must see you. I've been keeping a secret from you for some time, and I'm nearly dead of spontaneous combustion. Perhaps it's too late and you'll only find a coat and skirt—the other lingerie oddments would, I'm sure, be combusted, too—when you meet the 1.15 train. It's a *great, great secret*, but everything is settled now. Colin will come down for the day on Sunday and help to eat one of the ducks. Now curiosity shall smoulder in thee!

"Have you heard that Frank Hamilton has married a study in yellow?—yellow in her pockets and yellow in her face—called Maria Jacobs, and she has taken a house in Belgrave Square? Rhoda, who knows all things indecent, says he made her settle a large sum of money on

him and then announced his intention of travelling in the East—without her. She herself—Rhoda, I mean—is very annoyed. With great difficulty she got hold of a new man—vastly rich—who met her husband and became interested in his plays. He is putting up the money for a show in the autumn, and Rhoda hasn't got a look-in. Funny world, isn't it?

“Wave a Union Jack on the platform on Saturday, and I will fall out on top of Socky.

“Thine,
“PAT.”

Lady Currey did not like letters to be read at breakfast—she insisted that Claudia should have the meal downstairs—so she had had to keep it until she could stroll forth in the garden. Well, Pat's secret wasn't such a great secret, after all. Claudia smiled as she wondered why it is that couples in love never imagine that anyone else notices! She wished Pat every happiness, every happiness——

She broke off a fragrant red rose and buried her face in it. It filled her nostrils with the sweetness and fragrance of life. It meant beauty, youth, happiness! Those things were for Pat, not for her. Then the rose recalled her last meeting with Frank and the little dinner-table. He was not finding youth and beauty with Maria Jacobs, he was finding what apparently he had always wanted—money. Well, he had made no wound in her heart, it had been mere physical attraction.

Then she heard Lady Currey speaking. “I think it is very dangerous to inhale the perfume of flowers so near one's nose. I read in a book once that it may affect one's brain. Besides, there are often earwigs and things.”

Claudia held out the rich, red bud. “Isn't it beautiful? Would you like me to fill that empty rose-bowl for you?”

“John does not like the smell of flowers in the house.

I always have to see that there are scentless ones on the table, and really"—plaintively—"it is quite difficult."

Claudia looked at her. She was extraordinarily well preserved, even in the bright morning light. There were no lines to tell her age or mark character. But it was not a face that invited confidence, that would attract a child or make a precious miniature in any man's heart.

"And, of course, you always consider his wishes in every way, even small ones?"

Lady Currey looked at the red rose laid lovingly—fearless of earwigs—against the soft, creamy cheek. The months spent in the country had, from a physical point of view, been greatly to Claudia's advantage. Forced to go to bed early and roam the country lanes and fields, she looked the picture of health and strength. The face was now a little sad in repose, too thoughtful for her age, the lips had a faint droop, she did not laugh so readily and so gaily as before she was married; but no one could look at her and not admire her glowing beauty, her lissome, finely-moulded body instinct with vitality and magnetism. As she stood on the lawn in her simple white linen frock with a big black velvet bow at her throat, she made Lady Currey look like an expressionless china doll.

"Women were meant to study their husband's wishes. I know, of course, that modern women like yourself no longer practise that creed—a creed, I may add, laid down in the Bible. I am told that women make a great point of being independent. But have they gained man's respect by it? I ask you that. How do men speak of women nowadays? But lightly, I fear."

"Did men ever respect women very much?" said Claudia gently, tucking the rose into her white leather belt. "If men really respected women, would it be necessary either loudly to demand independence or for them to *study* men's wishes? Women have been in subjection for ages—not satisfactory; it is now freedom and in-

dependence—not satisfactory. Perhaps the third phase will be happier for both.... Colin Paton is coming down for the day on Sunday. I suppose Gilbert would like to see him?”

Claudia could not help noticing that Lady Currey looked at her rather sharply. “Did *you* ask him down?”

“No. As a matter of fact my sister is staying in the village for the week-end, and he is coming down—for her.”

Lady Currey's mouth dropped open a little and she stopped snipping at the roses.

“Oh! is he? Then he doesn't——? That will make a difference. Gilbert will be certain to want to see him.”

Claudia's curiosity was aroused. Lady Currey did not often cut her sentences.

“‘That will make a difference’....why do you say that? What will make a difference?”

“You mean me to deduce that he is—er—interested in your sister? Yes, quite so. Of course, when people are ill they have curious ideas. I never believed it possible myself. His mother is a good woman, I believe, though she is not High Church, and I have always thought highly of Colin Paton. Of course, as John says, it is a thousand pities that he has got drawn into the net of these mad Socialists, and if I were his mother——”

“What fancy has Gilbert got into his head?” interrupted Claudia, looking over to the other side of the lawn, where her husband was reading the newspaper. He was now much better, and could walk half a mile or so.

“Oh, nothing much, only—he fancied—that you saw too much of Colin Paton. He—he imagined Mr. Paton was in love with you, but I was sure he had too much respect for himself to fall in love with a married woman.”

Claudia stared at the prim little face for a moment, and then she commenced laughing. Gilbert jealous! Why, he had never troubled a scrap about Frank Hamilton,

he had never noticed Charles Littleton's devotion, nor any of the other men who were always making love to her. He had chosen to be jealous of the one man—almost the only one—who had never whispered amorously in her ear. It was too ludicrous! Yes, a sick man's fancies are odd.

"Poor Gilbert!" sighed Lady Currey. "But he is much better now. Dr. Neeburg—I wish he had been an Englishman—said last week that he was doing splendidly, and it is only a question of time. We shall soon have dear Gilbert restored to health. By the by, what is this rumour I hear that Lynch House at Rockingham has been taken by your brother?"

Rockingham was some four miles away across the downs, and Lynch House was a big, rambling old house, with a huge, neglected garden. It had been empty for some years.

"Yes, it is true. Jack has rented it for a time, and my sister-in-law is being moved down for the rest of the summer."

Lady Currey looked her strong disapproval. "What can a—a paralysed woman and your brother want with such a big house? Why, it has quantities of bedrooms! Surely, most unsuitable."

"Fay has a little scheme in her head," returned Claudia quietly. "She wanted to be near me, that's why she came to Rockingham, and she wants a big house for her scheme."

"Is she going to turn it into an hotel?" said her mother-in-law sharply, looking her dislike of *any* scheme The Girlie Girl might have.

"Yes, a first-class hotel, where the guests have no bills to pay. She's got the idea of having some of her old hard-working friends in the profession down for a good holiday."

She and Fay corresponded regularly. Sometimes it was rather difficult to make out Fay's scrawls, with their

extraordinary phonetic spelling and enormous dashes, but they had grown into the habit of talking their thoughts aloud to one another. Claudia was often surprised how much Fay comprehended of what she wrote her. There were things she said and wrote to Fay that she would never have communicated to any other woman, not even Pat, so that a strong link had been forged between them, a curious bond which made life more possible for both of them. Claudia often forced herself to be gay and cheery when she wrote to Fay, and she read between the lines when Fay's jokes rang a little false. Jack wrote and told her that Fay was too stunning for words—high praise for him—and that she didn't often cry now, and since she had got the idea of being moved—it was pathetically easy, seeing how small she was—and having some of her pals down for a week or two at a time, to give them a good spree, she chirped away like a sparrow about it all day long.

"H'm." Lady Currey pursed up her small mouth. "Most unsuitable neighbourhood for such people."

"It's a very beautiful, healthy neighbourhood, and I think it's a splendid notion of Fay's. I'm proud of her idea."

Lady Currey was crumpling up her eyebrows when Gilbert called out to Claudia. He wanted a book fetched from the library. Claudia never attempted to be too sympathetic with him, nor did she proffer any, even friendly, caresses. Gilbert had made it so plain that he merely considered her as a useful secretary. His father was getting old and his son was sometimes impatient with his slow brain; his mother was—his mother, but she could never be trusted to find a book or look anything up for him. But Claudia was quick and practical, and he never had to explain anything twice.

After she had fetched the book she lingered irresolutely by his chair. His hair was going very grey, and his body had grown heavy and flabby, but in the face he looked

much healthier. His skin was a better colour, and the circles round his eyes less pronounced. His nerves were distinctly less ragged, he was beginning to sleep quite well, and the cardiac symptoms had not shown themselves for some time.

"Gilbert," she said, "Colin Paton is coming down on Sunday. . . . Why have you not wanted to see him? He was awfully kind at Le Touquet. Have you ever properly thanked him?"

He did not look up from the book, but she saw that he had been listening.

"Oh! I think I did. Besides, didn't you thank him? You and he are great friends."

"Do you complain of that?" How beautiful the leaves of the copper beech were under the sun. The grass at their feet was flecked by little jumping shadows, as the slight wind ruffled the branches.

"No. I have every trust in Colin."

Claudia gave a sharp exclamation, and threw up her head. "What do you mean by that, Gilbert? Isn't that an extraordinary statement to make about your friend?"

He still kept the book open. She saw that it was a book on Trades Unions.

"Why do you pretend not to understand me?" he said coldly. "I have told you I do not object to your friendship. Why do you pretend that you do not know Colin is in love with you? I suppose he came to Le Touquet partly to be with you. Wasn't it he who suggested you should come?"

"No, it was Mr. Littleton. . . . You are absurdly mistaken. Why is it men will never believe in a man-and-woman friendship? Colin is in love with my sister."

She expected to see him start, but he did not. He did, however, look at her, with a curious, critical, upward gaze.

"Did he tell you so?"

"No, but—I know."

"Really!" But the tone lacked conviction. He commenced to turn over the pages of the book.

It was only a sick man's fancy; it must be. And yet Gilbert had had no other kind of irrational fancies. He had remained his old egotistical self, multiplied by about four. Her voice was a little agitated as she put her next question.

"Gilbert, I wish to know something. It is only fair you should answer it, as you made—a statement. What gave you the idea that—that Colin cared more for me than as a—friend?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I have been trained to observe men and women, and my observations of Colin lately—I had nothing to do at Le Touquet except watch such things, which, as a rule, do not interest me—coupled with one or two facts, such as his going away as soon as our engagement was announced, and that he has not married, have led me to think that, as you put it, he cares more for you than as a friend."

Claudia drew in her breath jerkily. "But it's Pat, I tell you—Pat."

"I am glad to hear it. I certainly thought he was in love with you. But as he can marry Pat and he cannot marry you now, I am glad to hear it.... Claudia, will you go into the room where the periodicals are kept and see if you can find a copy of the *Fortnightly*—some time last year—which has an article entitled 'Labour Unrest.' I daresay you've heard my father is having some trouble in Langton. The workers in the paper-mills have been threatening to strike for some time, and we want to nip it in the bud. I think the article was late last year, about October or November."

Claudia moved across the lawn, her brain furiously and chaotically working. She thought it was the heat of the sun that made her feel confused and giddy, yet a moment before she had not felt it.

CHAPTER XXIII

AROUND THE CORNER

IT was Saturday morning, and a very warm day, when Claudia started out from the house to meet her sister. The station was nearly a mile away through the fields. She had refused the offer of the dog-cart, although after she had been walking a few minutes she rather regretted her decision. The sun at half-past twelve was grilling, and there was hardly any breeze to stir the long grass, rich with big ox-eyed daisies, waving red sorrel, yellow trefoil, and all sorts of field flowers. She kept her sunshade well over her head, but it is really very tiring to walk in the heat on an August day.

She wondered why she felt so listless and depressed. Why did she feel that life was simply a barren desert? Probably it was the result of having to listen to the pompous old vicar the previous night, who had engaged in a deep but narrow discussion with Sir John on the degeneration, ingratitude and irreligion of the working-classes. The talk had been brought about by the dissatisfaction in the mills at Langton, some ten miles off, from which Sir John derived a large part of his very handsome income, and as Claudia had listened, she had

wondered with a mild amusement what Colin would think of the views expressed around the Currey tablecloth.

She ought not to be depressed when Pat—jolly, good natured Pat—was coming down to see her, and she tried to be severe with herself as she swept through the grasses. She must not be gloomy when Pat was coming down to announce her engagement. True, her own experience of married life had not been ideal, but Colin was different, and anyway, one had no right to dash the hopes of the newly-engaged. Some married couples are happy. She must be glad. She *was* glad. If it were not that inflated windbag, the vicar, it must be the remembrance of her own happy anticipations when she had first become engaged to Gilbert that made her feel blue. The sun to-day did not seem brilliant and wonderful, but only tiresomely hot. The long, luscious grass was not an exquisitely soft carpet, but only rather long for walking. The station was not one mile away, but many miles.

At last, however, the little sleepy station was reached, and she sank with a sigh of relief on one of its wooden seats.

Pat and Socky did fall out together, and then Socrates, being a friendly and remembering beast, nearly knocked Claudia down in his demonstration of joy at seeing her and being once more on *terra firma*.

"Socky, shut up, you beast. . . . Look out, Claud, he'll break your string of pearls. . . . My dear, you are blooming! If I could burst into poetry—Socky, leave my ankles alone—I should say you were like a red, red rose, or an apple-tree, or something equally unlike a woman. . . . Socky, come away from that pond. Can't you see Auntie Claudia has got on a nice, white muslin frock? Darling, I'm awfully glad to see you."

How boyish Pat looked in her grey linen coat and skirt, and neat white silk collar and tie. It seemed almost absurd, the idea of her getting married. One could easier

imagine her having a wrestling bout with her lover, as did a certain Cornish heroine of fiction. If she had been espousing some happy-go-lucky, high-spirited youth of her own age it would have seemed more feasible—but Colin Paton!

"Mother has become a Roman Catholic," chattered Pat, "or she is going to become one when there's a vacancy, or however they do it. Why? Oh! she's tired of the professional spooky people, and she now finds that the 'greatest and only true mysticism'—her words, not mine—is to be found in religion. She's going into retreat, she says. As a matter of fact, I suspect she is going to have a new skin treatment that Rhoda is raving about, and which takes three weeks, during which time you have to lie *perdu*. She is going to pray for all of us and repent very picturesquely of her sins in purple and grey, not being able to commit quite so many now. She says that her liking for incense foreshadowed this. I told her she couldn't become Saint Circe and pose in a stained-glass window, however much she tried; but her new rôle is to be very patient, oh! so sweet and patient." Pat laughed. "She isn't a bad sort really—she stumped up for all my bills the other day—only why on earth does she want to pose so much? Ah! the 'Three Compasses!' That's the ducky window—dost see? If there were anyone impressionable about I should do the sentimental act from that window. He would call 'Let down your hair, let down your hair, Patricia,' in a sepulchral voice, and I should carefully remove about twenty hairpins, two side-combs and a piece of tape, and then lean out with a fatuous smile."

"Well, Colin is coming down to-morrow, you tell me. No doubt he will oblige."

Pat shook her head. "He's too sensible for those tricks. Besides, he doesn't admire fair hair. I will not let down my hair to a man who prefers dark hair."

They entered the inn, and were shown up to a quaint-shaped, homely bedroom.

"Pat, Lady Currey graciously extended an invitation to you for lunch to-day, but I told her a fib. I said I was engaged to you for lunch here.... Now, tell me the—secret."

"In a minute.... Do you like apples, lots and lots of apples? Would you like to be buried in apples, rosy-cheeked, luscious apples?" Pat grinned at her sister as she threw off her coat and commenced to wash her hands.

"I like them tolerably," smiled Claudia, watching the noisy ducks waddling in the pond. "But why——?"

"You'll like them intolerably soon. Wait till they arrive in barrels! But, as the novels say—I anticipate. Over lunch I will to thee impart the great news. Glory! Hallelujah! there's an imitation of a bathroom. I shall have to bath in instalments, but I had awful visions of an egg-cup in my bedroom. No, wait till we've started lunch."

"I can guess one thing," said Claudia, with a slight effort. "You are going to leave home. The house of Circe will soon be empty of her children."

"It will. Where's that wild beast gone to? He mustn't kill *all* the ducks. Oh, here he is! You idiot, that's a turnip. Turnips don't need catching. You are discredited as a sportsman. Anyone can catch a turnip.... Well, do you remember the talk we had when I said matrimony was not for me and you pretended not to believe me?"

"And now——"

"Now I'm sure of it. Look at me well, Claudia. I am a woman to be respected. Here at this table behold a farmeress! Salute her with the gravy-spoon!"

"A what!"

"A farmeress—feminine of farmer. I am the legal owner of a fruit-farm in Canada, and another of England's unemployed will, at the beginning of next month,

emigrate and leave the sinking ship. It's rude to stare, my dear sister. Isn't it a brilliant idea? Alone I did it. At least, no. I got the idea and Colin Paton helped me to get the farm and see that it was genuine and above-board. Why, Claud, old girl, what's the matter?"

For suddenly Claudia found herself half laughing, half crying, and nearer hysterics than she had ever been in her life. She had a silly, light-headed sort of feeling that she could not account for. She seemed suddenly freed from a suffocating sensation that had oppressed her lately. She had never before experienced the sensation of wanting to laugh and cry at the same time. Indeed, she had always despised people who got so muddled in their emotions. But though she made an effort to keep on laughing—there was nothing really to cry about—the tears ran down her cheeks.

"It's all right, Pat.... It's being shut up with the Curreys and the strike, I think.... Oh! Socky!" For the dog, very perturbed, was standing with his feet on her shoulders, showering moist kisses upon her. "Socky, go away....give me some water....all over."

Pat surveyed her anxiously, and she saw that although her sister's physical health seemed perfect, her eyes were those of a woman who lies awake at night thinking.

"Claudia, old girl, you want a change. Come to Canada with me next month. Do—it will do you a lot of good."

Her sister shook her head and absent-mindedly wiped her eyes on the serviette. "Go on, tell me more about it."

Then Pat, her eyes shining with excitement, told how an article on the future of women as fruit-farmers in Canada had fired her with a desire to do something real, as she expressed it, to get out of the smug, bandboxy life she was living. She had consulted Colin, who encouraged her, and all through the summer they had been investigating various farms that were for sale, and only a few days ago had they finally settled on one in the Win-

nipeg district. "Colin was no end of a help to me," concluded Pat, "because, of course, I should have been done in the eye like Martin Chuzzlewit was. But this is a good farm and belongs to a woman who wants to give it up, but she has consented to stop with me as long as I want her, so I can learn the whole box of tricks. Claudia, I know I shall love it. That's what I meant by apples just now. I shall send you barrel-loads, simply barrel-loads."

Claudia asked if their father and mother had given their consent, though Patricia was of age and had her own income.

"Yes, in a sort of way. They think I'll come back in a few months, but I shan't. I told you long ago I was a throwback. I love the earth and all that pertains to it, and what's the good of wasting my youth and energies in what the papers call Society? It's all right for those who like it. I'm not slinging any adjectives at it; but I'm not made that way. I want more scope. But, seriously, will you sail with me next month for a holiday to see me settled?"

"I should love it, but you see—I've got a husband." Then, half-smilingly, yet with a touch of sarcasm, she added, "I've become useful to him, Pat. He complimented me the other day on my neatness and method in arranging some documents for him."

Pat walked to the little window and said something to herself that was very like "Damn!"

"But he's better, isn't he?" she said, turning round again. "I shall never forget how scared I was when they got him back to the hotel at Le Touquet. They had to support him on the grass-roller. I was afraid he was dead, he looked so awful. I begged him not to go on playing, but you might as well ask an elephant to tread in a whisper. It was that climb up to the fourteenth that did it. But his heart is all right again now? Does

one quite get over a thing like that? It's all vague to me. What's the anatomy of a heart? Does something heal up?"

"He will have to be more careful than formerly not to over-exert himself or get excited. But Neeburg says there are many people with worse trouble who live to be ninety. But let's come out into the sunshine and sit under a tree!" She went to the door which opened on the small garden. "Oh! isn't it a glorious day! Come and tell me more about the apples!"

As Claudia went back to Wynnstay that night she wondered what she could tell Gilbert about the mistake she had made. Was it necessary to go up and gratuitously inform him that Colin was not engaged to Pat? She had made a blunder. Ought she to correct a wrong impression? Was it a wrong impression on anyone but herself? Gilbert's attitude had certainly been one of quiet scepticism.

The sun was setting, and the earth was very peaceful and restful after the hot day, as she walked up the long approach to the house. Now she was alone, she ought to be able to think out why Pat's unexpected secret had moved her so strangely. But somehow, she had not want to probe into her feelings to-night. She only knew she felt happier than she had done for a long time. But then, Pat was a cheering person, she would have enlivened a graveyard. She hummed a little song as she walked, the drowsy birds twittering a half-hearted accompaniment.

Pat and Colin came to lunch with them next day, for though Pat had made a hideous grimace at the prospect, she had ultimately agreed that she had better pretend to be a well-behaved person. She had urged Claudia to go with her to the station to meet Colin, but her sister had for some reason undefined, even to herself, pleaded the heat and the distance. Besides, was he not really coming

down to see Pat? Not in a lover-like way, but still to see her. Was he? Was he?

She took out his last letter from Manchester. Somehow it seemed to read differently from the day she had received it.

"When are we going to forgather?" it ran. "Letters are always so inadequate. I have crowds of things to tell you, and why don't you write more about yourself? Your account of life at Wynnstay was most amusing. I could picture the deadly regularity of its clockwork, but what about the alien in its midst? Has she become a carefully adjusted machine too? I know what it must be to live with the Curreys day after day, and I wish I could help you in some way. I am sending you down a couple of books I think you will like, and a newspaper-cutting in which you will see I am described as an earnest, middle-aged man! Rather a blow, that! I wonder if I do impress people that way? Of course, it was probably written by some reporter at the back of the hall, but—'tis a horrid thought. Earnest! Middle-aged! I've still got two thirties to spare...."

At lunch—or, as Sir John would insist on everyone calling it, luncheon—she did not sit next to him or have an opportunity for any private conversation. She had to be content with a long look and a smile. The vicar and his wife always dined with them on Sunday, and there were two or three other people, quite uninteresting, but very chatty. Claudia wondered vaguely why uninteresting people generally are chatty.

It was not until nearly four that Claudia found herself free to talk to Colin, and she had been sitting so long that she jumped to her feet as the vicaress was lost to sight.

"Let's go for a little stroll before tea. Colin, do you know the view from the windmill? It's rather jolly. Come and see it. Get up, Pat."

"No, mum, it's too nerve-racking looking after Socrates. Now he's chained to the tree I don't want to disturb him. No, go thou to the view. Peradventure thy servant will slumber a little. Those beastly ducks and a perfectly abominable creature called a guinea-fowl wouldn't let me sleep this morning, and the hardness of the bed wouldn't let me sleep last night. These facts, combined with an English Sunday lunch (I beg his pardon—eon) make me what writers call somnolent. Go away and leave me to somnol."

Claudia gave a great sigh of relief as they turned out of the gates of Wynnstay, and he looked at her with quick sympathy.

"It isn't an exhilarating existence at Wynnstay, is it?" he said. "I know how you feel about it. But it won't be for much longer, I gather?"

"No, thank goodness. It is rather dreadful. I either feel perfectly comatose or so irritably alive that I want to scream. Don't let us talk about it. Let me tell you how glad I am at the success of your book. What a magnificent notice you had in the *Times*. Don't you feel on top of yourself?"

"I won't pretend that I'm not glad. But, honestly, it has been rather a surprise. I had a horrible feeling all the time I was writing it that it was *vieux jeu*, that it had all been said before. It is charming to find people so appreciative," he concluded modestly.

"You've waited and done something worth doing," said Claudia slowly. "That was prophesied of you long ago."

"My waiting was pure laziness," he said lightly. "The silent man is not always the wise one, though he does look unutterables."

"Well, I'm glad, I'm very, very glad," said his companion simply. "It gives me quite a thrill when I read the notices. Now tell me about Pat and her farm."

Claudia found that he had gone into the whole matter

very thoroughly, as he did everything he took up, and that Pat, through him, had made a very sound and promising bargain.

"And you approve of Pat going out there?" she said. "It sounds rather mad. Suppose I took a craze in my head to go out to Canada and farm, would you do all this for me and pack me off with your blessing?"

He laughed. "You and Pat are two very different propositions. Besides, you are not a bachelor like Pat."

"No."

There was a slight pause.

"Pat doesn't seem to want to marry. She snaps her fingers at your sex."

"Oh! that will come later on. She'll marry right enough one day, when the right man comes along. Pat isn't unfeminine or a crank."

Claudia shot a sideways glance at him as they walked in step together. They were passing a hedge fragrant with honeysuckle and she stopped and picked a piece.

"Do you know—oh! do you mind getting that top piece—I once thought you had a—a fancy for her."

He looked down at her, honeysuckle in hand, a curious twinkle in his grey eyes. "I'm very fond of Pat, but not as a wife, thank you. I'm neither old enough nor young enough for her. Middle-age would not mate well with the Amazon."

"What ridiculous nonsense! The reporter was blind. You don't look middle-aged.... Are you ever going to take a wife, Colin? Thank you. Doesn't it smell sweet?"

They were approaching the top of the hill on which stood the windmill revolving very slowly, and from whence a magnificent view of the country around could be obtained. Perhaps the jerks in their conversation were due to the need of economy in breathing, for the climb was fairly steep.

"Do you insist on my marrying?"

"No....of course not.... Isn't it hot? Why did I choose this walk? But most men get married sooner or later, and—you—don't dislike women, do you? You're not unmasculine or a crank! But as a matter of fact," she added recklessly and breathlessly, "I'd rather you didn't, I think."

She thought he gave a little exclamation, but she could not be sure.

"Why would you rather—I didn't?"

"Married friends are never the same as before they were married. Oh! here we are at the top at last! Isn't the view worth the climb? No, please, don't get married. I—I don't want you to."

What was she saying? She hardly knew, except that it was the truth, the plain, unvarnished truth. She had really *hated* the idea of his marrying anyone, even Pat. There was something in the air this warm summer afternoon that made her take a reckless joy in saying the things she should have decently hid.

"I—I don't want you to," she repeated, suddenly raising her eyes to his as they stood side by side, each apparently a little breathless still.

She found he was looking at her and the quiet strength of his face was all broken up. The eyes looked at her as they had looked once before. When? When she had been flirting with Frank Hamilton at her mother's.

And suddenly she knew.

It was as though something that had always been hiding round the corner for many years unexpectedly came into view. And with the knowledge came a rush of joy, so great, so overpowering, that she reeled. Instinctively she put out her hands and he took them in his.

"Colin, I never knew until just this minute. Isn't it curious.... I'm so glad, so glad."

The hands held hers very tightly, the warm, capable

hands that had always held her heart so safely, so securely, if she had only known it. He was looking at her as though he could never look enough. She knew now the love that she had wanted so badly, so desperately, had been at her side all the time, faithful, tender, and, what means so much to a woman, understanding.

The scent of the honeysuckle, delicately persistent over the other field flowers, was around them both. The wind-mill across the field was giving slow, rheumatic creaks. A bird was chirping noisily in the bushy hedge.

"Claudia, you can't mean that you——"

"Yes.... I think I have always loved you, only I didn't realize it. The very strength of my love made it so quiet that I didn't notice it. When you are a girl you imagine that love will come with a great stir and noise, with a flourish of trumpets, so that all your senses will be deafened, and you will be bound a captive. One doesn't think of it as a great, noiseless, silent thing." She gave a queer little laugh that was a half sigh. "One always expects the big drum, a sort of circus, in fact.... Oh, my dear! I'm so glad I know. That's all I can think of now."

As she looked at him she saw that his love for her had taken its toll. There were little lines round the eyes—lines of repression, of unsatisfied desire that had not been there when she first knew him. He had suffered in that year in the Argentine when, because he was very human, he could not bear the sight of her happiness, when he had fled from her. He had schooled himself to be her friend, to aid her whenever she should call upon him, after that year, but it had not been done easily. Most men would have ridden away, unable to fulfil the demands of friendship, unwilling to bear the continued sting which the sight of her brought them. She saw now that his one aim had always been to make her happy, he himself had always come in a poor second. Gilbert had wanted her

to make him happy, and she had chosen—Gilbert!

"Oh, Colin!" she cried, "I don't deserve that you should have gone on caring for me all this time."

"Claudia, I can't believe it. I've hungered for your love so long that, like a starving man, I can't eat. I tried to be content with your friendship. I tried not to think of you in any other way, even when——"

"Yes?"

How steady and tender her eyes were.

"Even when I knew you were not happy. I'd given up all hope. I had almost made myself believe I was content with your platonic affection."

She laughed a little mischievously.

"Shall I take my love back? Ah, no! I couldn't. It's been out of my keeping so long. Yes, it's true, Colin." She blushed hotly. "I will be honest. I have felt passion for two other men, Gilbert—I thought that was passion born of love—and another. But the best part of me has always mated with you, always loved you. And yet I didn't discover it until I thought you were going to marry Pat."

The word *marry* sobered both of them a little, but did not detract from their happiness.

"Colin," she said gently, "why did you let me marry Gilbert? I asked you once before in a different form. I think—I am almost sure, I was ripe for love in those old days when we used to poke round picture-galleries and book-shops together. I was always perfectly happy with you. Didn't that mean love? Why didn't you tell me?"

"My dear, I wanted to give you plenty of time. Perhaps it was a mistake, but I felt it was your due. You were so young, so beautiful, such a success in Society, that I wanted you to have every chance. I'm nothing in particular, and I didn't feel it was fair to press my suit until you'd got to know what the world and men were like. You see, you were always a little romantic, idealistic, enthusiastic, and such women as you are difficult

to woo fairly. One is afraid to take advantage of you. Because we were good chums didn't necessarily mean that you could be happy with me as a husband."

"And yet isn't friendship, comradeship, the best foundation for marriage?"

"Some people say yes, some say no. I suppose one can't generalize. It depends on temperament, age, experience, many things. I adored you, but that was natural. There were any amount of men who adored you. I thought I knew those you were at all likely to marry. Oh! I watched carefully, sometimes agonizedly. And then, as you turned them down one by one, I began to hope.... Your engagement to Gilbert came as a bomb-shell. Gilbert, my old college friend! Why, I was hardly aware you knew him, except that you had been neighbours as children."

"I didn't.... He just carried me off my feet. I can't think, even now, how it happened....a sort of intoxication—youth, music, passion. In those days he was very much the male animal, and you see....it was the flourish of trumpets....I was deafened....I thought it was the real thing, just because I was moved. When will women learn that the men who move them physically are not always the men they really love? No one can say I was brought up ignorantly; there were certain broad-minded, lax ideas I grew up with side by side, but I didn't know. I thought it was love, because I liked the feeling of his arms around me. The two things are so horribly alike at crucial moments. If only they were differently dressed!"

"I know.... I never moved you that way."

"You never tried. If I had once thought of you as a possible lover....who knows? At least, I have learned what a large part a woman's imagination plays in the game of love, but the woman is poor indeed who finds nothing for her imagination to feed on after marriage...."

Why," she exclaimed in wonderment, "I can't imagine life without you. As I look back I see that our friendship has been a thread in my life for years, and I really believe the whole fabric would fall to pieces without it. Unconsciously I have always turned to you, always applied your standards to things."

"Claudia!"

"Yes. . . . I think *you* saved me from a terrible mistake. . . . You said I wasn't to speak of it. But I must now, just this once, then it goes into the realm of things utterly forgotten. You remember the night you found me on the stairs. . . . I expect you guess somewhere near the truth. Don't look like that. It was as much my fault as his. I was ready to snatch at anything to fill my life. I thought I could—but I couldn't."

"It wouldn't have made any difference to me," he said steadily. "I should have understood the reasons that drove you to it."

She looked at him, and marvelled that what he said *was* true.

"But I'm glad," she whispered, "that I—couldn't. It would have made a difference to *me*. I think we should not have been standing here now. It wouldn't have lasted, I should have gone on plunging. . . . Let me tell you something. That night your card was on the mantelpiece in the studio. I picked it up, and from that moment my mood changed. Somehow you seemed in the room with us. . . . Then I hated the way he had painted me. I knew you wouldn't like it, and I wouldn't like you to see it exhibited. I didn't want to be that woman—because of you. I see it now. I didn't understand why my mood changed at the time. Now it's clear to me, and I can only marvel that I have been blind so long." The mingled tenderness and strength of her face were very beautiful, as she added, "That temptation can never happen again. I shan't feel so restless any more."

He drew in a deep breath. "Claudia, it's like an impossibly sweet dream that you should be saying these things to me. I know what you have meant to me for years; but that I can mean anything to you! Is it all quite real? You are sure it doesn't come from your generous heart, just to comfort me, now you have found out my secret?"

"It's real," she smiled, standing in front of him, and putting a piece of the honeysuckle in his buttonhole. "It's the only thing that is real in my life. Fay and I have both been trying to fight, each in our own way—she's helped me too with her pluck and courage, but now this makes the fight much easier. Now I shall go on almost happily, because I've got my wish, the greatest wish in the world."

"And that is——?"

"To be first with the man I love. I am first, am I not?"

"Don't you know? Need you ask? If—if I ever had the chance, my one aim would be to make *you* happy, because—a man is always selfish, you see—that would make me happy."

"And that knowledge does make me happy. You and I belong to one another, just as much as if we were married, wherever we are, whatever we may do." Then she gave a little laugh of contentment, and threw out her arms to the countryside, so green and smiling all around them. "This afternoon you and I, Colin, are on the top of the hill. We've climbed away from the stuffy, humdrum houses in the valleys. To-day we can shout and sing and be glad! Do you know, I seem to hear that Sullivan madrigal ringing in my ears, 'All creation seems to say, earth was made for man's delight'—do you remember? I am so happy, so happy. But it won't always be as easy as it is this afternoon. We're of the earth, earthy. At least, I am very earthy sometimes."

"My darling," he cried, passionately, more moved than he had ever been in his life, "you are the most wonderful woman in the world!"

"Dearest, shall I tell you a secret in the greatest of confidence? You won't tell anyone? *I'm not.* I like to think you think so, but I'm the most 'ornery' person, really. I shan't remain on the hill-top. I shall sigh and groan and grunt inwardly, and—I shall want you just as much as you'll want me.... I should hate to think you were too placid without me, I should hate to see serene, ethereal content in your eyes.... But if you know I'm feeling just as you are feeling, but, like you, resolutely sitting on those feelings, it makes it easier, doesn't it? Sexless, unemotional people never helped anyone. And because we look things in the face we won't be afraid to meet as friends; we won't run away from our happiness and—our pain; we won't fret because of a mistake that we can't alter, will we? We'll just make the best of what we have, shall we?"

"Everything shall always be exactly as you wish," he said, raising her hands to his lips. For a moment she wished that he would take her in his arms and kiss her, just once. Then she knew that he was right. Things in the future would be hard enough without that memory. For this was no sudden rush of passion that she felt, so that she longed to have his arms close round her. This man, standing on the hill-top with her, was her mate, her man, and naturally all that she had or was was his, by Nature's unalterable laws. If she could have then and there gone away with him, there would have been no hesitation, no fear, no breathlessness, only a joyous and calm acceptance of the beauty that such mating would hold for them.

After a while he said, "I shall go back to Manchester to-morrow, but at any time you send me the word 'Come,' I shall be with you by the next train. If you feel you

want to talk to me, if you are in any difficulty, you won't hesitate to send for me?"

"No."

When they arrived back at Wynnstay they found only stewed tea, an empty cake-dish, Patricia and an unrepentant cheerful Socrates under the trees.

"He demolished the plate of cakes at one fell swoop when my back was turned, and Lady Currey has gone into the house in disgust. She finally, I am sure, washed her hands of the Iverson family. A little cold stew?" Her blue eyes, at present so sexless and so keen, noted the exaltation of the hill-top upon their glad faces, and she raised her eyebrows as she peered into the teapot.

"Well, she's tumbled to it at last," she muttered. "And I can go to Canada with an easy mind. I don't care what she does or does not do with Colin Paton."

"What on earth are you muttering about, Pat?" laughed Colin. "Is it an incantation to the Family Genie—the teapot?"

Pat looked at him with a broad and bland smile.

"I was thinking out your epitaph, Colin Paton. But it will keep for a few years yet."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE STRIKE

IN the weeks that followed, Wynnstay was galvanized into life through the political and economic fray brought about by the discontent at Langton. Sir John and Gilbert talked the thing out *ad nauseam*, for Sir John was infuriated at what he termed the ingratitude of the mill employés whom he had kept going for so many years. Had the Curreys even considered another point of view than that of the capitalist it would not have been uninteresting to Claudia to experience at close quarters one of the big problems of the day. But all Sir John's narrowness and bigotry came out in the contest, so that even Gilbert had occasionally to tell him to moderate a little. It was most important that the men at Langton should be conciliated and kept on his side, in order that the seat should be safe for Gilbert, but how to do that and at the same time enforce his will upon the men was something of a difficulty.

On September the 20th practically the whole factory went out on strike, and Sir John nearly had apoplexy in his wrath.

"My mills! The mills my father had before me! The men I've employed regularly in good times and bad! It's outrageous. Parliament ought to deal with such things. The country is at the mercy of the Labour party."

"I always was against this general education," cried Lady Currey, examining a new piece of Sèvres she had just acquired. "Why, one of Robson's children is a school-teacher."

Robson was the ringleader in the strike, and a few months before had come to loggerheads with Sir John. One of his daughters—not the school-teacher—had gone away from the village some four years previously, and had recently returned with two children and no husband, and Sir John had refused her application for an empty cottage or to take her back again in the mill. Sir John said, "One must uphold the principle of the thing." But as Claudia gradually learned, Sir John had never been popular, and though Robson's grievance had inflamed the workmen, they had been in a state of ferment for some time—partly because they had become infected with the strike fever, and partly because Sir John refused to replace some old machinery with the modern which is used in most big paper mills. He was a strictly just employer and landlord, but he did not err on the side of leniency.

"I won't give way. I won't be intimidated by these scoundrels. You agree with me, don't you, Gilbert?"

"Yes." Gilbert's lower lip protruded pugnaciously. "Give way now, and you'll have no more peace. After all, you can afford to shut down for a time; then they'll come to their senses."

This went on every day in different forms, explanations to visitors all sympathetic to the Curreys, accounts in the daily papers, until Claudia was glad to go over to Rockingham and see Fay and her strange guests.

For they were very strange, according to Rockingham ideas. Fay had asked them indiscriminately, the only qualification being that they needed a holiday and could not afford one. Old Joey Robins was there, watching over Fay like a grotesque old clown in a wonderful

medley of garments that he imagined were suitable to the country. He had obtained from somewhere a pair of white flannel trousers, very much shrunk and yellow through washing, a brown velvet coat and a grey Trilby hat much too large for him. There was often a little mishap with the glazed white front which would pop out of the black waistcoat, but his celluloid collar was always spotless. A girl who did sand-dancing and had broken down in health, a once famous comedienne who had lost her popularity, an acrobat who had injured his foot, and a woman with a young baby, who had been deserted by her husband, were her other guests on this particular morning when Claudia went over. Fay, who was getting very thin and hollow-eyed, gave them of her best, for she had insisted on paying for the venture herself, and had, for that purpose, sold all her much-loved jewellery. "I shall never want it again," she had said to Claudia, biting her lips to keep back the tears.

Claudia had helped her to furnish the big old house with simple, comfortable furniture, and had procured a staff of servants to run it. And because of their liking and pity for their odd little mistress with her extraordinary ideas the servants stayed, though the vagaries of the guests, the conflicting orders of Polly—"head cook and bottle-washer," Fay called her—and the nurses nearly sent them distracted occasionally. When things got in too much of a tangle Claudia's presence was urgently demanded.

On this particular morning Fay was lying out under one of the big trees, the comedienne, a stout woman in her sixties, with the most obvious toupée Claudia had ever seen, sitting beside her doing "a bit of crochy." A little way off was the dancer, a thin, white-cheeked girl, engaged in making a pink muslin blouse from a pattern out of a penny journal, and snipping the bits over the lawn. The acrobat, in full view of them all, was doing

amazing stunts on the grass for their amusement.

Claudia had met them all before. Behind her back she was voted "a perfect lady, such high class, don't you know." More than that, they liked and admired her.

"Madam, welcome!" cried the acrobat, coming towards her performing the most extraordinary double-somersaults. "I bow to you! I go down on the ground before you! Hail!"

There was a chorus of laughs from the group under the trees. Claudia never failed to marvel at the ease with which they were amused.

"You're too funny to live," cried the dancer shrilly, who was by way of having a flirtation with him. "I don't believe you're no man at all. Your mother made a mistake. You're a piece of indiarubber."

"My mother was a highly respectable lady," returned the acrobat, with his hand on his heart, "and her portrait is here. It wasn't her fault she had a genius for a son. I say, is that a pocky-hanky for me you're making?"

"No, silly, it ain't. It's a blawse. Do behave yourself while Mrs. Currey's here, or I don't know what she'll think of us.... Oh! there goes the old muffin-bell for dinner. Funny how my pecker keeps up here. I get a hole in my bread-basket long before it's time to feed."

"Well, my dear, you take all you want or can pocket," called out Fay hospitably. "No charge for a second helping here, and the meat isn't all gristle and bone, like the chops the landladies get you." There was a chorus of assent. "If there's anything you want, you've only got to mention it."

"You're an ainjool, that's what you are," said the girl emphatically. "It's like 'Eaven to be here. It ain't 'alf doing me good, not much! I can pinch a bit up on my arm now. Talk about State Insurance; you give me Fay's insurance."

There was a general hearty murmur of agreement, and they all trooped off.

"I can see you didn't have a good night," said Claudia solicitously.

"No, I got the jim-jams a bit. How sweet you look in that frock; and yet, really, it's awfully plain, isn't it? Hardly anything on it except the lace collar. It's only really handsome people who can wear them plain things. I always have—had to have—lots of fluff.... I say, is it true you're going back to town next week?"

"Yes. My husband is so much better that he hopes to get back to his chambers again."

"Crikey! whatever will I do? I wish you could have stopped here."

What a little face it was now under the big white chiffon hat that Madame Rose had sent her as suitable for the country; her idea of country being apparently drawn from the "sets" at the halls.

"I'll come down quite often, dear. Then you think of stopping on here?" It had only been started for the summer months.

"Well, it's perfectly amazing what a lot of people want a holiday—no bunkum either; and somehow"—she looked round the neglected old garden; it had only been superficially tidied up, but it was full of flowers—"I don't want to leave here, now I've come. It's awful sweet, isn't it? I used to think I hated the country and that it was beastly slow and tame, but I like to smell the flowers—different somehow to those you have in vases—and I like to see the birds jiggling about so mighty busy over nothing. Wouldn't my old pals laugh at me! Fancy me watching the birds! The only bird I ever thought of was the one the gallery gives you sometimes. Not that the boys ever gave *me* the bird. Once I had a little trouble with some young fool that started to hiss in the middle of my song. It made me that mad! I stopped right dead and I looked

up and said, 'Well, come down here, my boy, and sing something better.' Ah, I got him! They started clapping me till you couldn't hear yourself speak. Ah, well!"

Claudia laid her hand on her sister-in-law's, but Fay was quite cheerful again when she spoke.

"And I think I'd like to be buried in the country; it's so clean and nice. Such a lot of smuts in town. Ever been in Kensal Green? My mother's there. They subscribed and bought her a grave. But I can't stand Kensal Green; gives you the bloomingest of humps. No, I'd like a nice, clean tombstone with bits of ivy and things. It would be such a trouble to bring me down from town. I don't feel I want to be moved much more, only from the house to the garden while it's summer."

A rush of tears blinded Claudia, for Fay said it in such a natural, unaffected way that it was inexpressibly pathetic.

"My dear! Don't!"

"Oh! I am a beast to make you miserable. I didn't mean to, darling. Between ourselves, I shan't be sorry when it's finished now. I'm ashamed of all the trouble I am to the nurses, though they don't complain—me, that used to be so nippy on my feet and do everything for myself. I'm more trouble than a baby.... Well, you never know what you'll come to, do you? My mother used to say, 'You're born, but you're not buried.' She had a bad time before she turned up her toes, poor old thing. I might be in a worse place than this. I might have been in one of those hospitals. Got a horror of hospitals myself.... I told them you'd have lunch out here with me. Here it comes."

She waited until the servant had gone, then she leaned towards Claudia and said earnestly, "I want you to promise me something, Claudia."

"Yes, Fay, what is it?"

"When I do the shuffle, you see that there are pars. in

all the papers, with my photograph. You're soon forgotten, but that'll wake 'em up. The Girlie Girl's got to have her farewell performance. I know I can trust you. I say, these peas remind me that Polly wants to see you about the kitchen-garden. She says the gardener is cheating us on the peas. Never seen anyone as sharp as she is now. She'll count the pods every day soon. She loves it here."

Claudia spent the day there, getting glimpses into strange ideas and modes of living, and arrived back at Wynnstay about six. Directly she got inside the house Lady Currey came out of the drawing-room in a very—for her—excited state.

"Oh, Claudia! what do you think? We've just heard that the strikers have become violent, and they are stoning the windows of the mills and the police are powerless to keep order. Poor John is nearly beside himself. I do hope he'll take care, with the stones flying about."

Claudia gave an exclamation of surprise.

"You don't mean he has gone over to Langton?"

"Yes, he would go. He thought if he talked to them he might calm them. I'm sure I don't know. It's all very dreadful, something like the French Revolution. Oh, dear! Oh, dear!"

Claudia from where she stood could see through the open door of the library where Gilbert usually sat in one of the big chairs. But the room was empty.

"Gilbert—where is he?"

"He's gone too. He promised to look after John and keep him calm."

"What! You ought not to have let him go. When did they start?"

"About four o'clock. I wanted them to wait for tea, but they wouldn't. It takes three-quarters of an hour to drive over. I don't know what the world is coming to. I've always sent them a lot of things for their rummage

sale, and last winter the blankets that I sent would——”

“Gilbert ought not to have gone. Why didn’t you stop him? You know what Dr. Neeburg said. He isn’t fit to go into a scene of excitement like that. He is just as furious about the whole thing as his father. He is not strong yet. How could you let him go?”

“He says he feels quite well now,” stammered Lady Currey, not liking the look in her daughter-in-law’s eye. “I told him *he* wasn’t to try and address the men.”

“I should think not.”

“They ought to be back soon,” concluded Lady Currey. “Oh, dear! I feel so faint and queer.”

Claudia thought the situation over rapidly, but there was nothing she could do. It would be no good going over to Langton. Probably they would be returning by now. If only Gilbert would *believe* other people occasionally! Neeburg, when he had come down and given Gilbert permission to go back to town, had told him emphatically that he would still have to take things very quietly for another year or two. And he had gone with his father to face an infuriated rabble of strikers!

“Stones are so dangerous,” feebly remarked Lady Currey, “but after all, men know best. I’ve never interfered with my husband.”

Claudia said nothing more as she went to take off her hat. She wished she had been at home. Yet, after all, if Gilbert had made up his mind to go, would she have been able to prevent his going? The Curreys were not used to women “interfering,” and he was not a child.

It was nearly seven when she went downstairs, but the carriage had not returned. Sir John had refused to have the house put on the telephone, so they could get no news. She and Billie went into the library, and she tried to read, but it was only a pretence. Her ears were listening for the sound of carriage-wheels. It was almost dark. Surely they ought to be home by now. Still, a horse-

brougham is not like a motor. The hills were rather worse coming back.

At half-past seven Lady Currey came in, carefully arrayed for dinner.

"Claudia, aren't you going to dress? You'll be late." Though the heavens might fall, Lady Currey would punctually and carefully dress for dinner.

"I'm getting anxious," said her daughter-in-law shortly. "They will be late too."

"Yes, I'm afraid so, and there's a fish soufflé. John does so dislike a heavy soufflé. But of course it can't be helped. It is late. You don't think any accident has happened?"

"I hope not."

"Claudia, do you think it is healthy to nurse a dog on your lap? But there, he's your dog! Oh, dear! Oh, dear!"

Another quarter of an hour elapsed, and Claudia was just getting up to do something—she hardly knew what—when at last she heard the sound of wheels. A growing sense of disaster lifted. The wheels had a homely, encouraging sound. For once there was some irregularity in the Currey *ménage*. Claudia rushed to the door herself and opened it.

She peered out into the sweet-scented darkness, but the brougham was closed. That, at least, was wise of Gilbert, for the night was a little chilly now.

"We were getting so anxious," she called out to two white, blurred faces she saw within. "What a long time you have been away."

Then a figure, unfamiliar to her, alighted. Surely there were only two people in the brougham. She heard Lady Currey behind her exclaim "Dr. Green!" in tones of surprise.

The man turned again to the brougham, and helped out a very old man. As Claudia saw the limpness and dejection of Sir John she turned sick. Something had happened.

The coachman shut the door.

Dr. Green and her father-in-law came up the steps, the doctor supporting the older man. Why did Sir John need support? He was usually quite hale and hearty for his age.

The coachman was making ready to drive away. Where was Gilbert?

With fascinated, frightened eyes she watched the two mount almost abreast of her.

Then the old man raised his eyes, as heavy and sombre as Gilbert's and now dark with suffering.

"Gil——" Claudia tried to articulate, but something choked her.

"Where's Gilbert?" said his mother behind her.

The eyes of the old man told her nothing, but the eyes of the doctor were full of pity for the two women. It was the same look as had been in the doctor's eyes the night of Fay's accident. As she saw it, Claudia instinctively put up her hand as if to ward off a blow.

The old man tried to explain.

"He *would* speak....they've killed him....wouldn't listen to me....thought he could....God have mercy on us all!"

"Do you mean—he's dead?" whispered Claudia.

The old man passed on heavily into the study. The doctor answered her very gently.

"It was too late when I got there.... Heart failure. I'm told he knew. Mrs. Currey, I am dreadfully sorry."

Claudia tried vainly to realize that what had been a few hours previously was not. There was no such person as Gilbert Currey. She, Claudia, was a widow.

CHAPTER XXV

"COME"

THE windmill was creaking in the same protesting, painful manner as Claudia climbed the hill where she and Colin had stood more than a year ago and looked at the view. But the waving fields of corn were all cut now, only a yellowish stubble remained. The hedges were beginning to show the approach of autumn, the yellowing leaf, the reddening berry. But it looked very much the same, just as peaceful and full of promise, though harvest-time was over. The sun was warm, but not so hot as it had been that Sunday afternoon.

Claudia felt her pulses stir as she gazed around her, for there is a richness and beauty in autumn that the earlier months lack. She seemed to feel Nature tugging at her sleeve, whispering in her ear, calling to her to rejoice that the fruit of the earth was ripe, the time of waiting was over.

It was more than a year since she had gone to live with poor Fay at Rockingham, but Fay was asleep now. As she stood there she thought of her with tears in her eyes, and her face turned to where in the distance a cluster of white gravestones lay bathed in the rays of the sun. By an ironic coincidence she lay in the same churchyard as

Gilbert, though the grass had not yet grown over the little music-hall artiste. Death had loosened the feeble hands that had clung so desperately—ah! how desperately in the last few weeks!—round her neck, and that duty was done.

She stood leaning against a gate, thinking a little soberly but not unhappily of many things. Then she drew forth a couple of letters from her pocket. The first that she re-read was from Pat, giving her a buoyant description of the harvesting on her farm, extolling the work and the climate, and cataloguing with evident pride the bushels of fruit that the trees had yielded.

"Do come out, Claudia, now poor Fay has gone. There's nothing to keep you in England; at least, if there is, bring the impediment with you. You must be tired out after all the troubles of the last year. I am really very worried about you, and if you don't come I shall have to leave the farm and fetch you. Colin writes me you are looking very pulled down. You are a brick to have stuck at Rockingham, but that's finished now. I'm writing to Colin by the same post. When I left I gave you to him with my blessing! Like my cheek, wasn't it?

"But, seriously, the trip would interest you, and I won't feed you exclusively on fruit! I think Colin would like to see my farm. Fancy his blossoming into an M.P. I'm so afraid he'll lose his sense of humour in the House...."

Claudia laughed a little as she put back the letter in the pocket of her white golf-coat.

The windmill creaked, and the wind rustling the dry leaves in the hedges blew her white serge skirt against her ankles, and seemed to sing "Go! go! go!"

The other was from Colin. She turned to the passage she wanted. It was on the last page.

"Dearest, I don't want to suggest any unseemly haste. It is always for you to make the decision, and I shall understand and acquiesce in anything you wish. Only, sweetheart, I am a good many years older than you, and time has cheated so many lovers. Shall we let him cheat us of any more years? Oh! if you only knew how I long for the time when we shall always be together, when just a whispered 'Claudia' will bring you to my side! You are with me in thought every hour of the day, but I want your dear presence. Dearest of friends, best of chums, when will you let me make you my wife?"

The wind fluttered the pages of the letter, so that she could not read any more. The sun was warm on her bare hand. All the earth seemed to say "Don't delay any longer, don't let the gods think you are ungrateful. Are you afraid of happiness?"

She raised the letter passionately to her lips.

"My Colin! My man!"

Then hastily thrusting it into her pocket, she half-walked, half-ran down the hill to the village. Her cheeks, a little thin from her self-imposed task, were a bright pink with excitement, and her whole body was aglow and superbly alive with the exercise as she pushed open a small, clanging door at the foot of the hill. There were oddments of sweets, toys and newspapers in the window, and a small boy who had just purchased some sweets that looked exactly like bootlaces stared at her in dull surprise as she passed him with a radiant smile. She had not just spent a whole halfpenny in two separate farthings'-worth at the sweet-counter, so why should she look so happy?

At the end of the shop was a small post-office department. The atmosphere was stuffy, and reeked of sealing-wax and tobacco. But the telegram would go all the same.

The romance of all the ages, of all the world, was in that piece of formal, ruled paper. The room might have been perfumed with attar of roses, and the boy with the liquorice bootlaces might have been Cupid himself! The telegram was not going on the prosaic wires, but on the wings of Love!

Yet, when it was written, it only contained two words, beside the address:

"Come. CLAUDIA."

THE END.

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